Deepening Inclusive and Community-Engaged Education in Three Schools: A Teachers’ Resource

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Deepening Inclusive and Community-Engaged Education: A Collaborative Project

Mark Evans and Leslie Stewart Rose

Improving the quality of education for all students is an important priority worldwide. Not surprisingly, improving the quality of teaching and learning in schools has gained increasing attention and continues to be a critical area of discussion and debate. Recent research suggests that while there are multiple, interconnected factors that contribute to deepening student achievement and engagement, what teachers know and are able to do is one of the most important factors. Research is also suggesting that teaching is becoming increasingly complex and that improving the quality of teaching in today’s world involves the ability to incorporate and integrate different kinds of knowledge, develop and utilize a sophisticated instructional repertoire, be responsive to expanding understandings of learner diversity, and continually adapt to shifting educational aims related to changing local and global circumstances.

UNESCO’s Education for All campaign, founded on an Accord of 164 countries to provide quality basic education to all, prompted research on the conditions that undermine the rights of children to education. UNESCO gives clear directives that the solution for educational change lies in strengthening learning environments, providing skilled teachers who can address the multiple needs of a wide range of communities, and integrating inclusive classroom and school-wide curriculum and instructional practices. UNESCO is unequivocal that an inclusive curriculum is fundamental to the achievement of high quality learning for all learners. In 2012 Ban Ki-moon, Secretary-General of the UN, emphasized the importance of this educational provision, thereby identifying access to education and the quality of learning as core pillars of the UN’s new Education First initiative.
Questions of social cohesion, learner diversity, and democratic citizenship have received considerable attention in education across Canada, and variations and contrasting approaches have been apparent at different times in different regions. More recently, there has been increasing attention to the diversity of student populations and the need for more equitable and inclusive practices to improve student engagement and learning in K-12 public education classrooms, schools, and systems in all provinces and territories. In Ontario, for example, the provincial government has introduced assorted provincial policies to assist and support this work (e.g., Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act). According to the Ontario Ministry of Education’s Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools Guidelines, “an inclusive curriculum aims to understand, identify, address, and eliminate the biases, barriers, and power dynamics that limit students’ prospects for learning, growing, and fully contributing to society” (2009, p. 6). In Toronto, one of the world’s most diverse cities and home to the largest public school board in Canada, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) identifies its mission as follows, “to enable all students to reach high levels of achievement and to acquire the knowledge, skills, and values they need to become responsible members of a democratic society” (TDSB, 2013). Accordingly, the TDSB has introduced a number of initiatives to deepen inclusive curriculum and instruction in school communities.

Numerous curriculum initiatives, policy reforms, and research studies have been undertaken worldwide in recent decades as teachers, policy makers, federations, and researchers attempt to understand what an equitable and inclusive education might look like, and how it might best be enacted in school curricula and experienced by students. Researchers in Canada, for example, are helping educators better understand the range of interconnected factors that need to be considered when planning for an inclusive curriculum (Kugler & West-Burns, 2010; Ryan, 2006). In addition, a host of resources have been developed to inform and guide teachers’ work in relation to curriculum and instruction that is directed toward equitable and inclusive education (Ciuffetelli Parker & Flessa, 2011; Lundy, 2008; Rolheiser, Evans, & Gambhir, 2011). Still, despite the growing interest in and attention to this aspect of education, a considerable amount of ongoing and thoughtful work remains.

THE INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS PROJECT

In 2009 the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) initiated the Inclusive Schools three-year pilot project with the intent to engage teachers, teacher educators, students, parents, staff, and administrators in investigating and developing effective inclusive curriculum and instructional practices that could be implemented in classrooms and school-wide. In addition, the project aimed to identify practices and factors that contribute to improved student engagement and learning and that strengthen community connections. Over a three-year period, three TDSB elementary schools—Carleton Village Public School, Flemington Public School, and Grey Owl Junior Public School—carried out 19 school-based inquiries. School-based inquiries were grounded in a professional learning process that emphasized inquiry, partnership, collaboration, action and reflection, and professional choice and responsibility. Participants had different understandings and experiences, which they brought to their particular investigations.
In the early stages of the pilot project, support for teachers’ professional learning focused on the notions of inclusive curriculum and inclusive schools. The sessions involved professional conversations based on current readings, an investigation of resources, guest speakers and workshops, and the introduction of a model for curriculum development and classroom professional inquiry. Each school identified small professional learning teams to investigate certain aspects of inclusive curriculum and instruction. An OISE instructor worked as a liaison with the principal and school team at each school on the design and coordination of the professional learning process. Additional OISE faculty and TDSB consultants provided different areas of expertise. At the end of Year 1, participants had the opportunity to share their experiences and promising practices with other participants in the project, and each school submitted an annual report about their activities.

During the second year, while professional learning continued to be a central focus, participants were involved in identifying, designing, implementing, and assessing inclusive curriculum and instructional practices. To identify and better understand how such practices could improve student engagement and learning and also strengthen school-community connections, teachers used and assessed classroom materials and instructional approaches, and they collected data on the use of particular materials and approaches. Teachers engaged in co-planning and co-teaching with instructional leaders and OISE faculty to develop curriculum. Participating teachers again shared the results of their efforts with colleagues in the three schools, and they engaged in reflection and critical discussions about the implementation of the materials developed and practices undertaken. Participants continued to explore pertinent resources and research material that informed effective practice; this process assisted them in refining their lens for analysis of inclusive curriculum materials. Annual reports were again submitted at the end of Year 2.

In the third year, most teachers completed their school-based inquiries. Near the end of the year, members of the professional learning teams in each school were able to consolidate and communicate their findings during teacher meetings and a mini-conference based on the theme of inclusive classrooms and schools. Colleagues shared the results of their inquiry projects, and consideration was given to future steps. Subsequently, school-based participants collaborated with a variety of people, including OISE liaisons, faculty, TDSB consultants, and other OISE partners, in the preparation of their school-based project reports, which are provided in this resource.

A TEACHERS’ RESOURCE

This teachers’ resource contains reports on school-based inquiries into effective inclusive curriculum practices. It is intended for teachers who are considering the integration of inclusive approaches in their day-to-day work in schools. As such, the purpose of this resource is to contribute toward understanding how to support student learning and ongoing teacher education in ways that are responsive to today’s educational context.
This first section of the teachers’ resource provides an overview of the project, including its focus, rationale, and context of the work. There is an introductory commentary by Lloyd McKell (former executive officer of Student and Community Equity, TDSB) and perspectives from the three principals of the participating schools at the time of the project’s initiation: Curtis Ennis of Carleton Village Public School, Lyn Davy of Flemington Public School, and Liz Holder of Grey Owl Junior Public School.

The second section provides brief summaries of the various professional inquiries that were undertaken, with attention to the focus of the inquiry, those participating in the inquiry, the investigation process, the results and reflections. The following lines of inquiry are presented in this section:

- **In response to a parent survey and to develop effective school-home relationships**, Taking Science Home to Enhance Student Engagement focused on ways to bring students in Grade 1 through Grade 6 together with their parents to engage in scientific thinking during homework time.

- **Connecting Home and School Through the “Reading Book Bag”** project created school-community partnerships to improve literacy skills for a group of kindergarten students.

- **Impact of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy on Classroom Management** shows how students become empowered as “agents for difference” by bringing issues of social justice to a Grade 5 science and information technology class.

- Through discussions with ethnic minority students of Grade 7 and 8, Building an Inclusive Community: Thinking, Feeling, and Caring Deeply Through the Arts used a culturally responsive art curriculum to integrate student identity with cultural heritage.

- **Raising Awareness of Student Learning Disabilities: Implications for Learning** presents the journey of Grade 6, 7, and 8 students in creating an inclusive learning environment for special education students.

- **Reducing Schoolyard Bullying: Highlighting the PALS Leadership Program** presents a playground-activity project that brings together student leaders, teachers, and parents for school-based anti-bullying practice.

- **Speak Out** presents a teacher’s classroom practice that was designed to empower Grade 8 students’ voices in learning.

- **The Diary of a Transforming Teacher**, based on a Grade 2/3 teacher’s journal, reveals a process of transformative thinking and pedagogy.

- To increase a group of Grade 3 and 4 students’ engagement in language art class, Read ‘a’ Rap explored new ways to connect the school literacy curriculum with learners’ ethnic literacy practice.
Fair or Unfair? A School-Wide Initiative that Led to the Creation of Literacy Kits brings teachers' and students' interests in social justice issues to the forefront; it introduces the inclusive literacy kits that the equity team created for Grade 1 to 8 students.

Using Culturally Relevant Books to Improve Literacy Skills focuses on enhancing Grade 5 students' critical thinking skills by means of critical literacy practices that connect with student experiences.

The Invention Convention, which grew out of students’ questions during science class, connects a group of Grade 7 and 8 students to the school’s science curriculum and empowers them to take an active role in their learning.

An Ant Nest: Student-Directed and Teacher-Assisted Inquiry to Enhance Engagement describes an alternative approach to discipline in a junior behavioural class and the resulting improvement in academic achievement.

Using Technology in a Grade 6 Classroom to Engage Students and Improve Achievement describes how a Grade 6 teacher engaged and motivated student learning by incorporating technology into teaching.

Learning through the Arts describes how a Grade 5 teacher used new strategies and differentiated instruction in the arts to bring equity to classroom learning.

K’naan and Kente Cloth: A Foray into Culturally Responsive Math Instruction focuses on a teacher’s approach to improving a group of Grade 8 students’ mathematical skills in preparation for standardized provincial assessment.

Student voice and relationships with the environment are central to Towards a More Inclusive Curriculum Through Visual Arts, which focuses on the interconnectedness of life: for example, when kindergarten students ask after recess whether some lives more important than others.

Creating a Student-Led Multicultural Math Night to Draw Crowds demonstrates ways to engage parents in their children’s learning and describes how this event not only provides opportunities for student learning and leadership but also honours the cultural and linguistic knowledge of families.

Incorporating Social Justice Issues in the Curriculum: From Literature to Action describes how social justice awareness was raised among Grade 5 and 6 learners and how these students explored opportunities to take action.

The third section of this publication offers a list of current resources for teachers who are working to integrate inclusive curriculum and instruction in elementary classrooms and schools, and whose aim is to improve student engagement and learning and strengthen school-community connections.
CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Learnings from these inquiries into inclusive classroom and school-wide curriculum and instructional practices illuminate a variety of practices and factors that contribute to improving student engagement and learning and strengthening school-community relations. These inquiries also reveal that this work is both complex and challenging and requires ongoing, thoughtful attention. The following five broad areas of learning emerged from these inquiries:

**Relevant curriculum content and design.** The results of these inquiries confirm the importance of providing students with an engaging curriculum content and design. Cultural relevance, social justice, student involvement, and real-life connections were important considerations in content selection.

**Engaging teaching and learning practices.** The inquiries emphasized the importance of the use of varied teaching and learning practices that actively engage students in their learning. Such teaching practices were characterized by an emphasis on clear student learning outcomes, a commitment to all students, high expectations for all, fair assessment and evaluation, technology-rich and arts-based learning contexts, and peer support.

**Ongoing, job-embedded professional learning.** The inquiries indicate the value of ongoing school-based and job-embedded professional learning characterized by clear links among district goals, professional development goals, and student learning, and also by opportunities for self-directed and collaborative modes of professional learning that connect theory and practice.

**School environment and relationships.** Results of the inquiries highlight the importance of developing supportive school communities where everyone’s talents are fostered and students feel valued, safe, and willing to take risks. Important contributing factors included attention to and positive responses to difference, feelings of safety, concern for students, and a valuing of parental involvement and community connections.

**Shared school leadership.** Results of the inquiries also suggest that an administration’s commitment to and modelling of equitable and inclusive practices, sharing and building leadership and consensus, engaging parents and the community in decisions, and celebrating everyone’s efforts cannot be underestimated.

Results from these inquiries suggest that schools aiming to deepen student engagement and learning and strengthen school-community relations must carefully consider the multiple and interconnected dimensions of inclusive education if continuous improvement is to be sustained over time. Researchers, practitioners, and community partners will need to work together over the long term to achieve these goals and to improve and sustain student learning and achievement. In particular, these results suggest shifting understandings of what teachers will need to know and be able to do and a clear recognition that ongoing professional learning with a steadfast focus on student learning will be crucial in satisfying these aims.
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BIOS

Mark Evans, PhD, is a faculty member in the Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning and former associate dean of teacher education at OISE, University of Toronto. His research and teaching focus primarily on teacher education reform, curriculum and instruction, and citizenship education, and he has been involved in a variety of education reform initiatives locally and internationally.

Leslie Stewart Rose, EdD, is a faculty member in the Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at OISE, University of Toronto. She served as director of the Elementary Initial Teacher Education program while project coordinator for the Inclusive Schools project. Her teaching and research focus on arts education, the music classroom as a site for well-being, and the journey of learning to teach.
Since its inception in 1998, after the amalgamation of Metropolitan Toronto, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) has given priority to the establishment of an inclusive school culture and related practices for its schools. The Board is committed to ensuring not only that the demographic diversity of its school community is valued and celebrated within its schools, but also that diversity itself is used to enhance the quality of teaching and learning to improve academic and social outcomes for all students.

The Board's Equity Foundation Statement affirms that “the Board is committed to ensuring that fairness, equity and inclusion are essential principles of our school system and are integrated into all our policies, programs, operations and practices” (1999, p. 1). With respect to teaching and learning, the Equity Foundation Statement further states that the Board will ensure that the curriculum of our schools accurately reflects and uses the variety of knowledge of all people as the basis for instruction; that it actively provides opportunities for all students to understand the factors that cause inequity in society and to understand the similarities, differences and connections between different forms of discrimination; and that it helps students to acquire the skills and knowledge that enable them to challenge unjust practices, and to build positive human relationships among their fellow students and among all members of society (p. 2).

The Board has central staff members who have specific responsibilities to assist schools in implementing its equity and inclusive schools policy and who provide schools with a variety of means to support the goal of an equitable and inclusive school culture. One notable resource document, “Equitable Schools: It’s In Our Hands,” contains a variety of instruments to assist schools with their plans and programs to build inclusion and equity.

Working Together to Strengthen Inclusive Schools Practices

Lloyd McKell
To further utilize community expertise in its approach to inclusive school strategies, the TDSB director of education convened a meeting of community stakeholders (advisory committee members, community liaison group, and equity-seeking community resource persons) in February 2005 to identify the components that the participants felt were important in developing an inclusive school culture. These components were then used to inform staff in their thinking and planning about strategies for enhancing inclusive schools across the TDSB.

In 2006–07 the TDSB conducted the Student Census, a comprehensive survey of all students. The purpose of the Census was to “identify the factors within the school system which may inhibit student achievement. Such factors should include but not be limited to differences in gender, race, ethnicity, mother tongue, income, and place of residence” (TDSB, 2004).

The decision to conduct the Census was in response to ongoing concerns expressed by marginalized communities about the persistent underachievement of students of these communities relative to other students. The goal was to assist the Board in developing policies and strategies to close the achievement gap between groups of students, as well as to establish a baseline of data to measure improvements in the educational outcomes for all students.

The Census provided data that linked student perceptions of their educational, home, and community environments and their student achievement data—EQAO scores, report card information—to specific demographic groups of students. The Census not only confirmed the existence of achievement gaps related to specific groups but also provided data from which analysis and conclusions could be drawn as to areas for possible change in policy and practice. One of the critical areas for enhanced focus and innovation was the area of inclusive school culture and practices.

Flowing from the above initiatives, the director of education for the TDSB announced a comprehensive strategy to address the need for change: the Urban Diversity Strategy. One of the key initiatives in this strategy was the establishment of the Inclusive Schools pilot project. The purpose of this project was to develop models of inclusive school practices based on the experience of three designated schools. Through the pilot project and with the guidance of an external consulting partner, the schools would develop, support, and strengthen inclusive school practices. The expectation was that learnings from this project would be identified as models of effective practices, and these would later be shared with other schools across the system to inform and guide their own efforts to build inclusive school cultures.

Three schools located in culturally diverse communities were selected to participate in this three-year pilot project: Carleton Village Public School, Grey Owl Junior Public School, and Flemington Public School. These schools volunteered to undertake this project after initial consultations with the respective principals and staff. The consulting partner was the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), of the University of Toronto, which has a solid history of working in partnership with the TDSB, and whose consulting staff has widely acknowledged expertise and experience in the area of inclusive school practices.
This teachers’ resource reflects the results of the pilot project. It is intended as a source of information and a tool to guide and enhance the work of other elementary schools across the system in building effective approaches to inclusive and equitable schools.

The work of building inclusive school cultures and practices, as exemplified by the experiences of the three schools, requires a supportive context to ensure that the approaches and strategies employed have the best chance for success. This context must include a commitment by the school and the central leadership at all levels to ensure that an inclusive school vision is consistently promoted and maintained so that innovation and risk-taking can thrive. This is necessary for breaking through systemic barriers to inclusiveness, and for creating equitable opportunities for success for marginalized students who are underachieving in the schools.

The supportive context also must include a commitment to the provision of adequate resources to support the teaching and learning environments, to ensure that the needs and interests of marginalized and vulnerable students are met, and to support innovation and risk-taking. It is also necessary to ensure that the work of supporting inclusive and equitable schools is built on a foundation that integrates a compassionate school culture that gives each student access to regular guidance and the emotional support of caring adults in the school, a culture of high expectations for all to inspire all students to overcome personal barriers and do their best, a commitment everywhere to excellent instruction that incorporates the principles of culturally responsive teaching, and a commitment to engage diverse parents and community members in ways that maximize their roles as supportive caregivers and external resource persons.

This teachers’ resource reflects the expertise and hard work of principals and teachers at the designated schools, their community volunteers, central TDSB staff who co-supervised and advised the project, and the OISE staff who coordinated and delivered expert services to guide, support, monitor, and evaluate the project.

REFERENCES


BIO

Lloyd McKell was chair of the steering committee for the Inclusive Schools project, while serving as executive officer for Student and Community Equity of the Toronto District School Board. He has a BA with honours in economics from the University of Toronto.
Diversity is a key feature of the student population within the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). Changing immigration patterns continue to add to the range of diversities represented at the TDSB schools, including culture, race, class, religion, ability, gender, and sexual orientation. Of primary concern to educators is the challenge of contributing to positive educational outcomes for all students. To promote learning environments that are safe, equitable, and inclusive, educators must first acknowledge the range of diversities within our schools as well as the forms of discrimination that hinder students from achieving their full potential. Secondly, educators need to address issues of diversity in an informed and effective way so that disadvantaged students, including those of minority backgrounds, do not become further marginalized.

This article describes a pilot project for promoting an inclusive learning environment that was undertaken at Grey Owl Junior Public School as part of the three-year TDSB Inclusive Schools initiative. Grey Owl Junior Public School, located in the Malvern Community of East Toronto, undertook a collaborative planning process for school-wide improvement. The school leadership team focused their efforts on curriculum design and implementation, and as a result, academic achievement improved across the curriculum, and parental engagement increased.
COllABorATIvE PLAnnING foR SchooL-WIdE IMPRovEMEnT

A principle of inclusive learning environments is the involvement of those who will be affected by decisions. Collaborative leadership offers an effective approach because the leadership is shared and can be transferred among individuals and groups, and input from all participants is valued and respected. However, various factors contribute to making some people more able than others to become involved in consultative and decision-making processes: for example, power imbalances and socioeconomic factors, language barriers related to lack of proficiency in the dominant language, and time constraints. To promote access to involvement in the process for all students and their families, educators need to find creative ways for everyone to participate.

As part of the planning process for school improvement at Grey Owl Junior Public School, parent surveys were carried out to obtain input from as many parents as possible. Data from the parent surveys was used in developing the goals for school improvement. Previously, the school had worked to improve the students’ literacy and numeracy skills. For this project, the parent survey revealed that parents consistently identified science as an area where they needed assistance in order to be able to support their child’s learning. Classroom discussions revealed that students were not interested in the school’s science program, and they had developed little understanding about what it means to be a scientist. Also, at the time of the school improvement planning process, a number of teachers were pursuing additional qualifications in science. Based on the information gathered from parents and students, science was selected as a focus area for this pilot project and the school’s improvement planning.

By using a collaborative approach in the decision-making and planning process, administrators and teachers had a shared sense of responsibility for the improvement goals developed for the school. The following are examples of school-wide initiatives that were implemented to support the teaching and learning of science at Grey Owl Junior Public School:

- a participatory action research project focusing on science and involving close collaboration among teachers, students, and parents
- the development of “science buddies” between primary and junior grades
- professional development sessions led by staff members and focused on building teacher capacity in science
- supports from the school community and from OISE that facilitated the development of science kits for students to sign out overnight
- school-wide assemblies with a focus on science
- parenting workshops and active involvement of parents in hosting the school’s first Family Science Night

As a school principal I recognized the benefits of the collaborative planning process: (a) having more meaningful input from parents during the process, (b) including teachers in decisions regarding their own professional learning, (c) having many more parent volunteers to support student learning, (d) developing greater student achievement in science, (e) bringing more focus on integrating non-fiction reading materials across the curriculum, and (f) altering students’ perceptions about what
it means to be a scientist. After the science-focused initiatives had been implemented, staff and parents found it rewarding to observe students at the elementary level—those who had previously thought they would never become scientists—eloquently describe which professions within the field of science they could now aspire to.

**FOCUS ON STUDENT LEARNING**

Socioeconomic factors contribute to the marginalization of many students, but many parents realize that their children’s future will largely be influenced by the quality of instruction provided at school. Because parents depend on teachers to give quality instructional programs, the leadership team at the school recognized that student learning had to be a priority and treated with a sense of urgency. According to Ryan (2006), “Educating the school community to be critical about issues of inclusion is important. These and other measures will mean little, however, if student learning is not affected” (p. 135).

As part of the planning process at Grey Owl Junior Public School, student achievement data was critically analyzed with an aim to understand which students were improving and what gaps or disparities existed in their achievement results. Several appropriate interventions were planned to help students attain higher levels of achievement. Two of these interventions are described in the following sections: culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy, and the implementation of Teaching-Learning Critical Pathways.

**CULTURALLY RELEVANT AND RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY**

Student achievement results at Grey Owl Junior Public School indicated that many students who were new to Canada did not enjoy the same level of academic success as the rest of the students. This was partly due to a curriculum that was irrelevant to the needs of newcomer students. Ladson-Billings writes, “The trick to culturally relevant teaching is to attend to students’ academic needs, not merely make them feel good” (1995, p. 160). To begin our pilot project, the teachers at Grey Owl Junior Public School engaged in professional learning by examining lesson-planning from an equity perspective. As a result, teachers used their students’ backgrounds as a vehicle for learning as well as for integrating social justice issues across the curriculum. In this way, students gained experience in critically examining texts from a variety of perspectives. Then students learned to examine exclusion and inclusion through asking questions such as the following:

- Whose point of view is dominant?
- Whose perspective is missing?
- Whose interests are being served?
- Are there missing perspectives or points of view?
We noticed that the posing of such critical questions helps to develop empathy in students, encourages students to put themselves in the place of others, and cultivates learning environments that are more socially just and inclusive.

**IMPLEMENTATION OF TEACHING-LEARNING CRITICAL PATHWAYS (TLCPS)**

TLCPs are used as a vehicle for improving teaching practice and improving student performance on a large scale. The rationale for using TLCPs is based on a model described in *Breakthrough* by Fullan, Hill, and Crevola (2006). In particular, Fullan et al. propose that “it is essential to move away from what has always been done toward a new reality in which diagnostic practitioners, who have a solid core of beliefs and understandings, develop highly personalized programs that match the needs of individual students” (2006, p. xv). Further, it is focused teaching that leads to students making connections and learning (p. 34). Grey Owl Junior Public School implemented TLCPs based on the conceptual framework shown in Figure 1. The instructional focus of this model includes the following components of teacher involvement:

- tracking and utilizing student achievement data to inform instructional practice
- collaborative design of culturally relevant pre- and post-assessment tasks and rubrics
- ongoing moderated marking of student work samples
- collaborative lesson design with an equity perspective
- reflection on instructional practice

Through the implementation of an equity-focused TLCP, students benefited from focused and precise instruction, and teachers benefited from opportunities to engage in collaborative professional development while refining their skills.

Promoting inclusivity at Grey Owl Junior Public School required collaborative leadership in which decisions were made in the best interest of all stakeholders. While implementing the school’s improvement plan, educators (a) demonstrated high expectations for all students regardless of their cultural background; (b) adopted a data-driven approach to student achievement; (c) focused on meeting the needs of their students through precise teaching, including the use of culturally relevant pedagogy; and (d) through the implementation of TLCPs, focused on refining their own practice. The learning environment that resulted from this process is one where cultural diversity is respected and embraced, students and parents are actively engaged and educated, and the focus is continually on positive educational outcomes for all students.
Figure 1. Conceptual framework for implementing TLCPs*

*Note: This framework is adapted from a model presented in City et al., 2010 (p. 23).
REFERENCES


BIO

Liz Holder, a school administrator with the Toronto District School Board for 12 years, has a BSc in Mathematics and Economics, a BEd, and a MEd in Educational Administration from OISE, University of Toronto. She completed research on the impact of Teaching-Learning Critical Pathways on student outcomes.
In the first stages of the Inclusive Schools pilot project, school and university groups came together to discuss what an inclusive school might be. The principals involved in the project were interested in examining their roles in change and understanding what leadership might entail within an inclusive school. The discussion included questions about influence and responsibilities. Subsequently, the principals demonstrated that processes within the school must be inclusive: that is, inclusive leadership involves all stakeholders and values multiplicity and diversity of perspective. To accomplish this, school leaders must advance inclusive practices within the school and in relation to its communities and global commitments.

Near the end of the pilot project, Leslie Stewart Rose sat down with Curtis Ennis to discuss his role as principal at Carleton Village Public School.
Leslie  When you define an inclusive school you refer to community and the communities that you serve in the school. What insights do you have about working with families from traditionally marginalized communities?

Curtis  At Carleton Village we endeavor to ensure that parents are truly engaged in the school. That starts with relationship-building. As a principal I do this, in part, by being very visible. I am outside in the morning when parents are dropping kids off. I say hello to them, we start a conversation, I learn their names. They know me and I know them. Then I can engage at a deeper level and in a more meaningful way. We have regular school council meetings with twenty people coming out and being involved. We get wonderful input from parents. We also make an effort to tap into the expertise of parents within the community so that they would serve as some of our “experts in the classroom.” Certainly when we were doing various lessons, the parents who had expertise in art, in engineering, in cultural sensitivity and diversity, those parents came into our classrooms and became the teachers. That is a powerful tool. While I appreciate all of the wonderful work that parents often do at schools around volunteerism and bake sales, I’ve always had in the front of my mind that it needs to be much deeper than that. It’s making that effort to say, “We want you to be engaged within the structures of our walls and within our curriculum and what we’re doing.”

Leslie  If you were to think about a continuum of authentic parental engagement and involvement, what would a Level 1 look like? What would we see? And Level 2, 3, and 4?

Curtis  Level 1, for me, is a bake sale. But I don’t knock cookies and bake sales. They’re wonderful, but that’s Level 1 on the continuum. Level 2 is where parents will come to school council meetings. Level 3 is where they will not only come to a school council meeting but they will also be asked for their input around issues and decisions that affect the school. Level 4 is reached when they become so intimately involved in the school that they become integral to the school community, providing their input and being asked for their advice: co-leading, if you will, in many ways.

Leslie  Will you share an example from Carleton Village that exemplifies Level 4 of parental involvement?
Curtis  We asked parents what they saw as some of the needs of the school. We did that through surveys and in conjunction with the participatory action research (PAR) that some teachers, parents, and students did with OISE. We engaged parents in a meaningful way by asking what they saw as some of the needs of the school, and how we might change the school. And so they told us. For example, they identified issues around bullying as something they would like to see us work on. And working with the parents, teachers, and students together, we came up with solutions to address those issues.  

Leslie  We saw participatory action research (PAR) (Fine et al., 2000) become a powerful inclusive school strategy in all three of the project schools. Participants—the people most affected by the problem and the decisions—were involved in identifying the questions, collecting data, and finding solutions together. Parents were involved and students led the way to solutions.  

Curtis  I think PAR is a powerful structure to involve parents. In this case, parents said, “This is what we identify as a need in our school, but we’re not just pointing out the problems, we, as parents, want to be a part of the solution. And here are some things that we can create together, co-create, in helping our school become a better, safer, more inclusive environment.” That authentic type of engagement with parents was a powerful piece in our journey together as an inclusive school.  

Leslie  I remember your OISE liaison going from classroom to classroom at your school as a way to bring students into the project, to ask students their opinions about what is “fair or unfair.” What were other ways that you brought students into that planning and decision-making?  

Curtis  We created Inclusive Schools Television as a way for our students to engage with media and inclusive work at the same time. Of course, you give kids a camera and they’re all excited. But the goal of equity engaged students even further! Kids, even in the Grade 1 classrooms, became involved in issues of social justice, making sure that the marginalized in our society and everyone is taken care of. Amazing! The kids loved working with the folks from OISE. I remember the Grade 1 class creating their own soup bowls and filling them, and making their contributions to issues around homelessness. Every grade, every classroom, really came up with the things that they were interested in. The extra supports were crucial. Working with our OISE liaison was integral to our success.  

Leslie  Curtis, I’m thinking about another conversation we had last year about involving students in “discipline.” What does discipline look like, feel like, in an inclusive school? As a principal, what was your approach when kids’ behaviour wasn’t maybe what you expected, or was dangerous, excluding, or not supporting their own education?
Curtis  For me, it all starts with respect. I always show respect to students from all backgrounds, from all groups of people, to ensure that they know that they’re walking into a place where they are respected. The expectation is that, in return, they should show respect: mutual respect for each other. When students do things that are not in keeping with what our community would expect, then the conversation includes the student discussing the expectations they did not live up to and how we’re going to involve their parents as part of the community in solving this issue. The goal is not to be punitive but, rather, restorative. Students know that my expectation of them is that they become their best selves. And that my counsel to them and my expectation of them is that their behaviour will improve through a series of what we call progressive discipline. Suspensions say, “Your behaviour is bad, you’re suspended, you’re out of here.” The goal is restorative: to nurture a better person. I always keep the end-goal in mind. What will it try to accomplish in relation to our students being responsible or respectful? We explicitly infuse empathy and caring into our day. It’s about caring for each other regardless of who we are, or where we come from, or our divergent backgrounds. We start each and every day with a pledge to each other and how we’re going to care about each other:

My actions and words will be kind and true, I will not hurt others with what I say or do.
I will help when I see others treated badly, respect their bodies, feelings, and things.
I will gladly consider others in my work and play and always solve problems in a peaceful way. I promise.

This is a promise that we make every day. And I often go on to underscore what we have just said and what the meaning of it is: that it’s not just simply repeating words, but that we live by it. One of the things I found really delightful was when the children would come up to me at the end of the day and say, “Mr. Curtis, I lived by that pledge today.” It was just so heartwarming to know that we’re setting a context. I know we’re talking about discipline, but we’re setting an environment and a context in which we care for each other, in which we respect each other, and in an inclusive way we’re honouring others.

Leslie  You have described how you work with parents and students. You say that teachers embraced the whole philosophy of an inclusive school. How did you communicate your vision and build vision with the teaching staff?

Curtis  I took an approach of “start small and grow.” I identified a set of people who had already articulated a philosophy of inclusion before the project began. They formed a base that would work along with me to share our vision. I didn’t want staff members to see it just as another initiative imposed on the school. I identified early on the people who I saw as forerunners in the inclusive schools movement and asked them to come alongside me. I took that small group, worked closely with that small group, shared the vision with them, and then we were able to spread it out to others. But I did also share with everyone my vision of an inclusive school. I got strong feedback from the staff who indicated that “yes, this is something that we really
need to embrace.” We made a three-year plan. I remember talking to parents and sharing with them the vision of inclusive schools, and they were looking at me like I had horns growing out of my head because they were thinking, why are you asking us this? This is something that every school should be a part of. Why is this not happening in every school already? You’re asking us permission to do this? I started small, built consensus in that small group, and used those teachers to reach out to their colleagues as well. The small group developed what our core mission and values were and things we wanted to accomplish, and then it unfolded over time to the larger school.

Leslie It’s interesting that you were very deliberate about this small team. Yet, the initiative developed across the whole school.

Curtis The teachers developed their own philosophies of inclusion and how they saw themselves as part of the Inclusive Schools project. We decided that if we were going to be serious about this we would need to infuse inclusive curricula into our Teaching-Learning Critical Pathways (TLCP). This may have been somewhat different from other TLCPs that focus exclusively on the big idea through the curriculum. We focused on inclusion. We made inclusion our big idea. At one point, we asked students to tell us what they wanted to do from an inclusionary perspective. The students’ passion and dedication was critical; they lifted us to another level of engagement in the school. It really took on a life of its own when the students got involved and started to develop their own inclusionary perspectives and said, “These are the things that we want to work on.”

Leslie Another important part of this story is your own story: who you are, your commitments, and your deep understanding of equity and change.

Curtis Well, I established early on that this is important work, that this is important to me. It is something that is integral to who I am. I remember doing hard work around cultural proficiency when we were stretching the boundaries—asking teachers to look at their own social positions and see where we are personally and as a school on a continuum of inclusion. We knew that this kind of work, inclusion work, can’t be something that’s just another set of activities. It has to be something that is in the core of who you are. We have to go through a sort of a self-transformation in order to get to a place where we can do the good work. So we took that inside-out approach, where we did that reflection as a group, in a very safe environment, understanding that we’re here to grow together, that all of us, including me, are here to reflect on our biases, to reflect on our values, to reflect on what we think is important and what is important to our students, and our communities, and to their success.

Leslie If you were mentoring a new principal to develop and nurture their school in this way, what advice would you give?
Curtis  I would start with being honest—honest with ourselves that we take a look at where we should be. And most likely, if we’re honest, the answer is that we are not there yet. And then, where do we go from here? And what do we need to do to get to where we need to get to? We were very fortunate to have worked so well with our liaison, who was a critical partner. She was a member of our staff. She was very hands-on, brought a lot of supports from the university perspective. I see the university as a critical partner in documenting, in providing the research component, in helping us with the data, and helping us to unpack some of the systemic issues of race, marginalized people, racialized people, and inequality in our society. Sometimes, as teachers, we don’t really pause to reflect on those things as much. I think that’s some of the work that the university partners can help us do.

Leslie  Would you like to have the last word as we near the end of the project?

Curtis  Change is difficult. Change needs to be customized for each school community. My ultimate goal is that it not be dependent on the leader, but that it would be infused within the very fabric of the school, so that regardless of who is in the principal’s chair, the work would continue. I want to see inclusion integrated everywhere in every school, in everything that we do. And I think when we do that, it just excites kids, it engages them in ways that we will no doubt see curricular achievements improve because they are so engaged and they are so enthused about the work of inclusion. I know the project is coming to an end, but the work continues.

REFERENCES


BIO

Curtis Ennis was principal of Carleton Village Public School and TDSB superintendent of education during the course of the Inclusive Schools project. He has bachelor degrees in business management and in education, and a MEd from York University.

Leslie Stewart Rose, EdD, is a faculty member in the Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at OISE, University of Toronto. She served as director of the Elementary Initial Teacher Education program while project coordinator for the Inclusive Schools project.
The Role of Leadership in Implementing Culturally Relevant Practices School-Wide

Lyn Davy
in collaboration with Ann Lopez

This paper examines the role of leadership in facilitating the implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy on a school-wide basis as part of the three-year TDSB Inclusive Schools initiative. An Inclusive School project was undertaken at Flemington Public School in collaboration with the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) of the University of Toronto. The purpose of the project was to support teachers and administration in implementing culturally relevant practices in the whole school. The goal was to improve the academic achievement of the students and include their culture and lived experiences in the teaching and learning process. The project provided research as well as mentoring support. The school was supported in this endeavor by Ann Lopez, OISE liaison for this project.

As principal, I sought to enact critical change within an inner-city, urban school with a predominately racialized student population. My aim was to improve teachers’ instructional practices and students’ learning and engagement. In this paper I examine the role of leadership during this project and the tensions the participants and I experienced. I also share the insights gained from this effort that might inform the work of other school leaders.
The TDSB Inclusive Schools initiative resulted from the recognition that a more relevant curriculum was needed to serve the needs of racialized students who were underachieving and at risk of dropping out of school. In this context, the term racialized means groups who experience social inequity on the basis of their racial background, colour, or ethnicity (Murray, 2011). According to TDSB statistics, 40 percent of these students drop out of school before completing high school (TDSB, 2010). Also, between 35 and 40 percent of Black, Hispanic, Portuguese, and Aboriginal students drop out of school before graduation (TDSB, 2010).

**SCHOOL CONTEXT**

Flemington Public School is located in the Lawrence Heights area of Toronto. In this subdivision streets do not connect to the older, more established, middle-class area that surrounds it. Toronto Community Housing Corporation owns most of the low-income rental units in the community where most of the students and their families reside. Lawrence Heights has been designated by Toronto City Council as one of 13 priority neighbourhoods for revitalization, requiring infrastructure investment and improvement in community service.

The school has 365 students in 20 classes from kindergarten to Grade 5. Five classes are special education classes. One-fifth of the student population are on Individual Education Plans, as many of them test at least two years below grade level in either literacy or numeracy. The teaching staff at the time of the project consisted of 23 teachers, six educational assistants, and one child and youth worker. A large number of the teachers have been at the school for more than five years. A family literacy centre and a daycare are also located within the school building.

The parent community comprises predominately newcomers and first-generation immigrants from East and West African countries as well as some from Caribbean, East Asian, Middle Eastern, and Latin American countries. According to the 2006 Census of Canada, Lawrence Heights has a very large immigrant population: over 51 percent foreign-born residents. More than 16 percent of these immigrants arrived in Canada between 2001 and 2006. Although most of the students were born in Canada, many are learning English as a second language because at home they usually speak in their first language.

Poverty is an overriding issue in the lives of the students and the community as a whole. To ensure that students are able to focus on learning, the school runs a nutrition program that includes a free morning meal for every student and a subsidized lunch. In 2008 the average household income in the Lawrence Heights community was $15,425, and unemployment was 16.2 percent. Fifty-seven percent of the families were single-parent families, and 31 percent of the families had three or more children. Over 95 percent of the students live in subsidized housing units, which are often run down and in need of repair (Statistics Canada, 2006).
The following questions guided this work:

- What is the role of leadership in implementing culturally relevant practices on a school-wide basis?
- How does an administrator effectively implement change on a school-wide basis?

**PROJECT FOCUS**

At the start of the project I worked collaboratively with the OISE liaison to determine the most effective implementation of the project given that some existing school practices would need to be shifted. The role of the liaison was to collaborate with the staff and administration in implementing strategies in the classroom and school. The school's leadership team met to discuss the purpose of the project and to examine its feasibility within the school setting. After the leadership team reached consensus, the initiative was presented to the staff to increase their understanding of what would be involved. In groups, the staff shared their ideas on how the project could best meet the needs of the school community. After a common understanding was developed for how the project would proceed, and after meetings of the leadership team with project members from the university and TDSB officials, the first phase of the project began. As a result of all the discussions, we decided to focus this project on four areas of school improvement: curriculum and instruction, school climate, parent engagement, and teachers’ professional development.

**Curriculum and instruction**

The teachers agreed that the Teaching-Learning Critical Pathway (TLCP) was an effective vehicle to promote the development of culturally relevant pedagogy because the monthly TLCP meetings were used to plan units, participate in moderated marking, and scrutinize evidence of student work. The teachers collaboratively designed and implemented culturally relevant lessons as well as pre- and post-assessments for students. During the TLCP meetings, the teachers determined how the experiences of the students and their families could become resources for developing units and assignments. In social studies and language arts units, for example, when creating assignments and using culturally relevant resources, teachers highlighted social justice issues such as child labour, poverty, and children’s rights. In another example, during a language arts unit, some teachers introduced the topic of “identity” and “name” and explored the meaning of students’ names.
School climate

In addition to the implementation of the Playground Activity Leaders (PALS) program, guest speakers were invited to speak with the students about bullying. The TDSB character education program was highlighted within the school with an emphasis on respect for differences and culture. During the school’s morning announcements students were recognized when they displayed characteristics such as respect, kindness, cooperation, integrity, perseverance, fairness, and honesty. Students were given the opportunity to attend culturally relevant theatrical performances, and the International African Inventors Museum was invited to set up a display in the school. African drumming was implemented, and various students took the opportunity to learn more about African cultures.

Parent engagement

Increasing the involvement of parents in the school and supporting them in navigating a school system that was unfamiliar to many of them was a goal of the school improvement plan. In this regard the school developed a program to assist the parents in understanding the process by which students are identified as needing learning support through special education classes. Historically, parents have been suspicious of special education placements as they thought that this “labelled” children. The school convened four meetings with officials from the TDSB, the school support team, the Identification and Review Committee, teachers, and administration to explain the identification process to parents. Through this initiative the parents developed a better understanding of the process. The school also initiated other activities to bring the parents into the school; these included movie nights, a math conference, family literacy night, first aid workshops, self-defense classes, exercise classes, a family fun fair, and lunch with the staff.

Professional development

The OISE liaison and the TDSB equity instructional leader facilitated a workshop for the staff on culturally relevant pedagogy. A book fair focused on culturally relevant materials was organized at the school for teachers. Culturally relevant books were purchased as a resource for students and staff. Some teachers participated in year-long professional learning about culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy at OISE.

OUTCOMES AND INSIGHTS

Data were collected during various activities through my own reflections and journals, teacher reflections and journals, field observations by a university researcher, and dialogue with the OISE liaison. The key insights and benefits gained from the implementation of the Inclusive School project are described in the following sections.
Changes in teacher practices

I noticed changes in the teachers’ instruction and the resources they used in the classroom. There was greater emphasis on resources with a social justice focus. These resources tended to foster engagement and motivate students to read and make connections to the books they read. In turn, this contributed positively to their academic achievement by developing important literacy skills, such as making inferences and connections to a text. In one example, the Canada Food Guide was adjusted to reflect the foods of different cultural groups in the school. A teacher noted during one of the TLCP meetings, “I will not just pick up a book to use in my class, I will make sure that it reflects the students.” The teachers appeared more willing to reflect on their teaching and assessment practices and try new ideas and instructional strategies.

Community connections to support learning

During the initial phases of the project the school had on site a cohort of elementary teacher candidates from OISE. Teacher candidates and their associate teachers held science and math family nights with the aim to (a) deepen the understanding by students and parents of math and science, (b) include and highlight non-Western accomplishments in science and math, (c) interrupt notions of who traditionally enters the professional fields of science and math, and (d) illuminate how the students are mathematicians and scientists in their everyday lives. A literacy night was planned and implemented in response to parental concerns about student engagement and achievement in literacy.

Student engagement

Student achievement was not specifically measured, but teachers provided anecdotal evidence of positive changes in students’ response to the text and their level of participation in class discussions. The data on student engagement were collected through dialogue with students and classroom observations. The teachers reported the following changes in student work and engagement:

- Students were able to make connections with the texts and find evidence to support their responses.
- The overall writing of the students improved in organization and expression.
- Students became more eager to answer questions because they found the texts more relevant and interesting.
- Students who usually wouldn’t participate took an active role in classroom discussions; as one teacher noted, “They had stuff to say.”
- Students shared their home experiences freely in class.
- Students also collaborated with their teachers and the OISE teacher candidates to present to the school community at a Multicultural Mathematics Conference.
Leadership challenges

In my role as principal, this project was a “critical learning journey.” Navigating the space between the teachers, parents, community, and school board was sometimes challenging as the interest of staff fluctuated over time. Initially, some teachers resisted the project because they felt that it would take time away from their regular classroom activities. Until teachers became involved they were not aware how these strategies could be embedded in their daily work. There were also challenges on how to implement change that impacted all aspects of the school.

I believe that for any change process to be effective, the goals of a project need to be clearly understood by all. Learning opportunities must be provided for teachers to help them wrestle with their own learning tensions. As a school leader with a focus on equity and inclusion, the implementation of this initiative raised some important questions for me: How is whole-school change implemented? What conditions must be present to effect sustainable change in pedagogical practices and also the climate of a school?

Professional growth

My own professional growth was supported by dialogue with the staff and university liaison. I deepened my understanding of culturally relevant and responsive practices through workshops and availing myself of culturally relevant works written by scholars such as Ladson-Billings, Sleeter, and Howard. I also came to the understanding that the journey of critical educators is complex and messy.

REFLECTIONS

This project has implications for social justice leaders, particularly those in urban and inner-city school contexts. Many aspects of the project were successful and will continue to inform the work of the teachers and administrators and have a lasting impact on the culture of the school. The tensions and challenges encountered along the way serve as learning experiences related to the challenges that school leaders face when they take on projects of this kind. For example, I’ve learned that it is important for everyone involved to have a clear understanding of the project goals and there must be extensive pre-panning and a periodic “check-up” to ensure that there continues to be a focus on the project goals.

There needs to be a critical mass of people who buy into the change process. I suggest that it is essential to listen to the ideas, feelings, and thoughts of the teachers and others who will be implementing the change. Sometimes the reality of others helps to expose implementation problems that must be addressed for a desired change to occur. For instance, some staff felt overwhelmed because too many initiatives of the TDSB and the Ministry of Education were being introduced at the same time. They felt torn about what initiative to focus their energy toward. Once the number of initiatives for which teachers were responsible was reduced, they were more willing and able to
concentrate on implementing the Inclusive Schools project. I believe school leaders need to ensure that the staff is not engaged in too many projects at once, as this can cause anxiety. Fullan (2001) suggests that the biggest problem facing schools in implementing educational change successfully is not the absence of innovation, but rather the presence of too many disconnected, fragmented, and superficially imposed projects. Hatch (2000) holds that when multiple innovations collide, work overload results.

While this critical learning journey was challenging at times, meaningful gains were made in creating an inclusive environment that was supportive of student learning and achievement. The TLCP became more securely embedded in the school structure, and the teachers participated in various projects to further their knowledge of inclusive education.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

To successfully implement school-wide changes that include change in teaching practices, the community must be involved. The curriculum units created by teachers at Flemington Public School on culturally relevant and responsive ideas can illuminate for other teachers how social justice, diversity, and equity can be interwoven into lessons and instructional practices. Workshops on culturally relevant practices are important for both staff and administration, and the workshops held at Flemington Public School can be an example for other schools. In addition to deconstructing TDSB policies and making explicit connections between the Board’s policy and school practice, the workshop helped teachers work out what culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy looks like in the classroom, including methods of implementation based on Ladson-Billings’ (1995) three educational pillars: academic success, cultural competence, and development of critical consciousness. When we ask in our schools, Whose voice is missing? Whose voice is present? we hope that this form of teaching and schooling becomes part of the normal way of doing things. However, before undertaking this approach to teaching and learning, school leaders must understand the complexity of this work. As a result of this project, I have been able to make necessary adjustments to my leadership style to enhance the school improvement process. Also, Flemington has begun its transformation into a school that has an inclusive environment and that enhances student learning and achievement. We have come quite a distance, but we still have some way to go.
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the students, parents, and staff of Flemington Public School for making this project happen. I would also like to thank our local university and in particular Ann Lopez, liaison on this project, for her dialogue and collaboration.

BIO

Lyn Davy, principal of Flemington Public School, has taught all grades from kindergarten to Grade 8, specializing in reading and special education. She has a master’s degree from York University and is currently working on her doctorate at OISE, with a focus on responsive leadership and culturally relevant pedagogy.

Ann Lopez, a faculty member in the Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education at OISE, University of Toronto, is currently the acting academic director of the Initial Teacher Education program. She has a doctorate in Curriculum Studies from the University of Toronto, and she teaches courses in educational administration and leadership.
At the end of the 2010 Family Literacy Night at Grey Owl Junior Public School, parents were asked to complete a questionnaire. Among other things, the teachers at the school wanted to know what other workshops or family events the parents wanted to see at Grey Owl. To our surprise, most of the parents said they would like to have a science night. We had not anticipated that interest in science would stem from the literacy night workshop.

The following school year we held an evening event called Science Share; students and parents were given hands-on science experiments and a website linked to additional science experiments that they could do together at home. Later, during an assembly, the students and some of the parents presented their experiments and what they had learned. After Science Share some students in the audience were interviewed, and they spoke about how much fun the event was and that they had learned a lot from their peers.

In the article “Skills in a Suitcase,” Bishop (1994) describes how teachers can use Learning Luggage with families. Bishop states,

> Parents told us that it is not just the pre-K child who enjoyed and benefited from the activities; the child’s siblings participated as well. Parents also reported that the activities were often repeated during the week…The Learning Luggage project proved to be a powerful and successful means of educating our parents as well as the pre-K and high school students (pp. 58–59).
**PROCESS**

Based on feedback from parents, we decided to engage students in a variety of science projects that they could complete during the school day. These projects were directly linked to the Grade 3 curriculum strand on structures and mechanism. For example, students built different structures, including bridges made out of different materials (such as newspapers and popsicle sticks). They tested the stability of the bridge by putting piles of books on top of them. Some students built toy trucks and tested them to see if the truck could go down a ramp with a 500 gram load in it.

Throughout the school, a variety of experiments were done involving magnetism, static electricity, and buoyancy.

For one of the activities we asked students to make an illustration of what they thought a scientist looked like. We discovered that most students thought that all scientists were older white men with glasses and funny hair. Our teaching team was intrigued by the students’ misconception and decided to interrupt the stereotype by having students research a real scientist, from the past or present, from around the world.

During the school day, Grade 3 and 6 classes got together in the gym and presented the projects to their peers. It was really exciting to see them in the role of the scientist sharing the results of their experiments. The excitement and participation shown by the students led to an interest in having Science Night. Different events and stations were set up throughout the school. We created a multicultural inventors museum, which was held in the library. Parents and students could see pictures of a culturally diverse set of over 100 inventions and inventors from around the world. The display featured a range of inventions, including everyday items such as window cleaner, eggbeater, lawn mower, and space shuttle retrieval mechanism. Students were quite surprised to see that inventors from many cultures existed. One student said, “I only thought scientists were white people.”

Based on the great enthusiasm expressed by the parents and students, the staff decided to create a school-wide initiative for bringing science learning into students’ homes. The teachers wanted to continue to foster a relationship with the parent community by using science kits for home experiments. The science kits were created and housed in plastic Rubbermaid® bins with lids. Each kit was connected to a specific grade and strand: Grade 1 Life Systems. The students brought home the science kit, which included a step-by-step procedure for the experiment, a list of materials for the experiment, a student journal for recording their observations, and a parent journal for sharing their feedback, and non-fiction book to support the science concept addressed in the experiment.

Our aim was to make homework more engaging and meaningful, increase parental involvement, and increase student achievement. To increase student achievement we planned to support students’ inquiry and problem solving, develop their confidence in doing science experiments, and provide more opportunities to explore their own learning. We were particularly interested in finding out how an inquiry-based approach could work in the home environment and how this could contribute to increasing student learning.
LEARNING

We collected parent, student, and teacher feedback forms, student and parent journals, and we carried out interviews. As our project unfolded, we gained evidence of student learning through our observations of students, the class assignments, and the parents’ journals. Generally, as a result of the project student engagement increased, and there was more quality time and communication at home. Four key results of this project are discussed below.

Increased content knowledge

Parent feedback regarding the science kits was close to 100 percent positive. Based on the feedback from the parent survey, most parents said their children learned a great deal from working on the activities in the kits. They observed that their children often learned new science concepts very effectively by engaging in hands-on and inquiry-based activities, rather than simply reading a textbook or filling in a worksheet. As a parent of a Grade 2 student commented, “The kids learn facts, [and] get more pleasure when they learn with hands-on experiments.” Also, some parents reported that with the experiential learning, their children were able to better remember the concepts they had learned in class. Because of the open-ended nature of some of the science kit activities, several parents commented that their children were able to exercise creativity, try out new ideas, and develop their imaginations. One Grade 3 parent indicated that she would like more hands-on homework like the science kits “because it brings out creativity in [children].”

Students enthusiastically expressed how much they had learned. Speaking of how much she valued hands-on learning, one Grade 4 student wrote, “Using objects for homework is better than paper work.” Also, a Grade 3 student wrote, “I would like to have more of this type of hands-on science because I learn stuff that I never knew about.” While all students found the science kits effective, teachers noted that the kits were especially useful for students who were struggling and not always comfortable with traditional paper-and-pencil activities. For these students, the science kits enabled them to be successful academically in ways they often aren’t. Students demonstrated increased confidence in their ability to do science activities in class. Teachers noticed that students had a sense of achievement after completing science activities.

Teachers gave very positive feedback on the use of the science kits as a homework tool. Many teachers noticed increased parental interaction with the child. They liked that the science kits represented a different type of homework than what was traditionally given to students. The science kits were also a vehicle to communicate with parents about what learning was occurring in the school. Teachers also noted that students were more motivated and engaged in class.
Increased student engagement

Student engagement refers to students being “more involved in their own learning and learning choices” (Capacity Building Series, May 2011). It is a critical feature in inclusive education. Teaching approaches for science, such as filling in the blanks and answering lower level thinking questions, leave many students disengaged and isolated from the learning environment because these approaches are disconnected from students’ lived experiences. Paper-and-pencil tasks are a barrier for students who are not reading or writing at grade level. We heard students and parents express a desire to have more experiential learning opportunities. Parents noted that the activities in the science kits were very enjoyable and engaging for the children, and, as a result, students became more interested in learning science. A Grade 3 parent reported that she enjoyed “observing [her son’s] interest and enthusiasm grow.” Similarly, when asked if she would like children to have more hands-on homework, one parent said yes because it gives students “joy of experiencing … [and] helps them develop interest in the subject and enhances their knowledge.” In addition, we found that some students became so engaged in the science kit activities that they began to perceive themselves as scientists. As one student wrote about his experience with the science kit, “it was really fun, and I pretended I was a scientist.” Another Grade 3 boy noted that he liked the kits “because you get an opportunity to build stuff before you get a real licence to build real structures.” Students’ interest in science and their confidence to do science activities was clearly fostered by their positive experiences with the science kits. When students are engaged in the learning process, they develop a positive attitude towards learning and begin to perceive themselves as successful learners who are an integral part of the school community.

Improved quality of time and communication at home

In many cases, an additional benefit of sending home the science kits was that children worked together with their parents, guardians, and siblings on meaningful learning activities. This was wonderful because parents and children had opportunities to spend quality time together. A parent of a Grade 1 student wrote, “I love the fact he got to build something, to see how it worked. The smile on his face, knowing that he did that was enough for me. Of course I learn things from him, and he learns from me. It gets us away from video games and television, and we get to spend quality time together.”

Simply spending time together and interacting in a positive manner with their parents and siblings was extremely meaningful. When interviewed about the science kit activities, a Grade 4 girl commented, “They were fun, and I liked them because I got to spend time with my mom when I was doing it.” She further noted that often doing homework is a solitary activity but that the science kits were different because she, her mom, and her brother all worked on the science kit activities together.
In addition to the obvious emotional benefits of spending time together, research has shown that regardless of disadvantage by race and gender, parental involvement is strongly associated with student success (Jeynes, 2005). In particular, Jeynes’ work demonstrates that engaging in meaningful communication between parent and child results in improved student outcomes. And while the science kits did not explicitly call for parents and children to communicate, we can readily imagine the multitude of rich conversations that must have taken place in those homes where the adults and children cooperatively engaged in inquiry-based science activities.

Parents as partners in education

As well as facilitating communication between parents and children, the science kits also served to give the parents a better sense of what their children were learning at school and what capabilities their children possessed. One parent of a kindergarten student wrote that she would like more hands-on homework “because it lets [her] see how developed [her] child is and what he understands.” Similarly, another parent of a kindergarten student wrote, “I do enjoy doing homework and school projects with my child because it helps me see how my child works and the skills that he possesses.” While working on the science kit activities, parents could observe their child’s progress, and they could perceive their child’s strengths and weaknesses. This type of involvement and perspective is important for parents because, we believe, it enables parents to communicate with their child’s teacher more meaningfully about their child as a learner. By helping their children with substantive homework, parents begin to develop a sense that they play an integral part in their child’s education. Regardless of home language or science background, parents can collaborate meaningfully with their children on school-related activities. This sense of involvement in their child’s education is especially important for parents who may be developing English language skills and who may feel somewhat disconnected from the school itself. Finding ways to reach out and support these parents essentially builds community and fosters a real connection between the parent, the student, and the school.

Reflection

The science kit development and implementation has changed how we think about differentiated instruction, stereotypes in science education, and parent-school-student relationships. Parents and students alike felt that the science kits were engaging and educational. The original objective of the take-home science kits was to give the students and parents access to learning that they might not otherwise have with homework assignments. The activities, many of which were inquiry-based, enabled students to gain knowledge, solve problems, take risks, and become more confident. Parental involvement and enthusiasm exceeded our expectations. From the feedback we received, it is apparent that there is a great desire among families for more homework involving inquiry-based and hands-on learning activities.
As a school, we had a greater awareness of the benefits of hands-on activities both at home and at school. Among the staff, there were more conversations about how we can make homework more engaging in other subject areas. As well, as a school, we are beginning to move towards making our in-class activities more open-ended and inquiry-based.

The challenge for teachers is to figure out ways to facilitate such learning opportunities for families on an ongoing basis—to ensure sustainability. Two main challenges that we had were the financial upkeep of the kits (replacing materials that were consumables) and time. We need time to prepare the existing kits for students to take home (replace materials and make sure all materials and equipment are in the kits) and time to create new kits to ensure continued student engagement. While there are logistical challenges in terms of acquiring and maintaining the materials needed for take-home science activities, it is clear that they are extremely beneficial for parents, students, and educators alike.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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BIOS

Elyse Hori teaches Grade 2/3 at Grey Owl Junior Public School. She is committed to engaging students with learning opportunities that are fun and challenging, and she plans to create additional science kits to further expand the home-based science kit program.

Keisha Dardaine has taught at Grey Owl Junior Public School since 2005. She will continue to create engaging homework activities and give parents opportunities to participate in their child’s learning.
Josefina Bernardino teaches Grade 2/3 at Grey Owl Junior Public School. She provides a welcoming environment that nurtures each student, takes each student from where they are, and provides activities that ensure maximum learning.

Mini Dindayal received her BEd from York University. During the Inclusive Schools project, she was a seconded OISE instructor from the Toronto District School Board, where she is a leader in Early Years learning, math education, and the Model Schools projects.
Deepening Inclusive and Community-Engaged Education
Deepening Inclusive and Community-Engaged Education

Connecting Home and School through the "Reading Book Bag"

Dianne Chin
in collaboration with Ann Lopez

Many students arrive at Flemington Public School with skills in a language other than English, but many also arrive with gaps in foundational literacy skills in their home language as well as in English. When I decided to work with the students on improving their reading and oral skills, I knew it was important to include parents in the process. Most students in my kindergarten class were not reading at Ontario’s standard grade level. These emerging young readers needed support to build their literacy skills in areas such as spelling their name and making letter-sound connections.

Having a visible and meaningful relationship between home and school is an important aspect of a child’s learning (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). The purpose of my project was to use culturally relevant resources and instructional approaches to increase kindergarten students’ basic reading skills, letter and sound recognition, and phonemic awareness—particularly for students who were identified with gaps in their learning.

Flemington Public School
I am a kindergarten teacher in a school where the home language of most of the children in my class is not English. Research has shown that this situation creates tension for both students and parents, and letting go of traditional instructional approaches can be challenging (Sandoval-Taylor, 2005). As Cummins (2003) argues, it is important to support students’ learning by embedding the subject content within the context of students’ lives where they have many ways of finding meaning. Researchers that suggest teachers include the students’ culture in their classrooms also report a positive impact on learning, schooling socialization, interaction, and communication (Cochran-Smith, 2003).

Up until this project, although all the students in the class were racial minorities, the kindergarten reading materials primarily represented Eurocentric cultures and images. I was interested in the benefits of using culturally relevant books for the development of students’ literacy skills and the value of parental involvement in the process. I felt it was important for the students to see themselves in the reading materials. The following questions guided this project:

- How do culturally relevant reading books in junior and senior kindergarten classrooms support and build students’ self-image and literacy skills?
- How might parents be involved in such efforts?

**PROCESS**

With the support of the parents I created “reading book bags” that contained culturally relevant materials the students could take home and read with their parents. In the classroom the students helped create these instructional materials. To enhance the learning that was taking place in the classroom, the resource list was sent home on a weekly basis. Each book bag contained books appropriate to the students’ reading level and also a parent sign-off logbook. These books provided parents with the opportunity to listen to their children read the words or sentences they had learned in class. The creation of the book bags was supported by project funds for the purchase of classroom resources.

The focus of my project was to involve parents in the literacy development of their children. When parents, students, and I initially met to discuss the project, we decided that the parents, teachers, and students would create and co-write books that were culturally diverse and reflected the lives of the students in the school and classroom. As a team we decided that the books should represent the foods and traditions of the students in the class and also the activities they engaged in, such as working on math, playing, and reading.

Using school cameras, parents of the students volunteered to take pictures of everyday activities they did with their children and photographs of meals they ate at home. At school, we collected pictures of students engaged in a variety of activities, such as sand play, block play, drama centre, and reading and writing activities. During carpet time the students chose the images they wanted for the picture books that would go in the reading book bags. The students loved seeing themselves and their friends in the pictures. Using these pictures the students’ literacy skills developed because they talked
about what they were doing in the pictures, and they wrote sentences about the images in the photographs. The students drew on their own vocabulary to create the sentences. Following are examples of sentences created by students in my kindergarten class:

- **“We are in the library.”**
  The picture shows students sitting on the carpet in the library listening to a teacher reading a story. The students are holding up their hands, asking, and answering questions.

- **“We are writing a math story.”**
  This picture shows students in pairs working on math and building on their numeracy skills while learning their words.

- **“We are playing with the puzzles.”**
  This picture shows students working with puzzles to build their critical thinking skills and teamwork.

- **“We are reading a book.”**
  This picture shows four students at a table each reading a different book and a book of their choice.

Students created several books with their own pictures, words, vocabulary, and sentences. Each book had about ten pages and the books were entitled “Our Class.” For durability the books were placed in Ziploc bags. Copies of the books that were not sent home in the reading book bags were placed on the bookshelf in the classroom; students could choose to read one of the books during independent reading time. When the books went home in the reading book bag and the parent felt that the child was able to read and understand the book, the parent signed off in the logbook.

**LEARNING**

The picture books sent home in the reading book bags gave parents an opportunity to see what was happening in the classroom and to ask their children questions about their classmates and what was going on at school. It was a way of bringing the school and the curriculum into the living room of the parents. The parents reported that having their children’s pictures in the books, instead of pictures of children they do not look like and do not know, made the students want to read.

Throughout the process I gathered anecdotal information from the students by listening and speaking to them and through observations and conversations with the parents. Each day the students were asked to read, pronounce words, and identify letters placed around the class. I also asked them to create sentences about their experiences in the classroom and ideas they read about with their parents. I observed the students participating in these activities and documented their progress. The documentation was primarily to inform parents on the report cards and to inform myself about things I needed to pay closer attention to. Through these activities I was able to see how the students connected with the material. Because they became familiar with the words, I noticed a marked improvement in their confidence and self-esteem as readers. They also liked seeing
things they knew in the books, such as the foods they ate. Gonzalez (2005) suggests that to go beyond the view of culture as a “problem,” the following must be embraced: bridging the chasm between household and school, instantiation of reciprocal relationships between parents and teachers, pedagogical validation of the household knowledge with which students come to school, and development of teachers as researchers (p. 40).

As the project progressed it became evident that including the voices of parents in curriculum-building was important; this would make it possible to go beyond the celebratory view of culture as song and dance. The reading book bags proved to be a way for parents to be directly involved in a supportive and organizational role and also in the development of curriculum content. The buy-in of parents and the connection that was made between the school and home was one of the greatest impacts of this project. The parents became very invested in the project not only in the creation of the books but also in the opportunity to read with their children. According to Browning-Aiken (2009),

The funds of knowledge and experiences within immigrant families can become educational resources for curriculum development and provide insight into more effective pedagogical practice. The use of these funds in practice can also affirm the cultural identity of students and enhance the relationship between teachers, students and their parents (p. 167).

This perspective was very much confirmed during this project. Many of the students’ parents were immigrants who did not see their cultural heritage in the foreground in the curriculum. The feedback from the parents and children was positive as they saw their cultural practices reflected in the books and felt that the process was an affirming experience.

**PROFESSIONAL LEARNING**

This project also had a great impact on my professional journey and practice as a teacher. I was able to see ways that the curriculum could be made culturally relevant and respond to the needs of the students. I was able to give students a voice and centre their learning in their own experiences. They were happy in their learning and often called me over to show what they had done.

The project also affirmed for me the importance and possibilities of parent involvement in the educational process. It made me realize that when clear guidelines are provided for parents on ways they can participate—instead of blaming them for a lack of interest—improvements can be made. The process develops based on who the parents are and then fosters opportunities to build on their knowledge.

Participating in this project made me realize that the planning and time needed to create a culturally relevant curriculum does not happen without everyone’s effort. Parents who are not accustomed to being involved in the school process require support and guidance in becoming involved. It is important as well to build trust with the parent community before engaging in this type of work.
I also learned from the challenges encountered in this project. One example was how to collect suitable pictures when most of the parents did not have digital cameras. Digital cameras would have provided instant feedback and better quality pictures. Also taking the pictures to be developed took time away from the project. Some challenges occurred in communicating with parents because of a time lapse between when resources were sent home and returned to school. These challenges show ways to make such efforts and practices better. I would have benefited from the support of an assistant in the classroom to help with the collation of pictures and curriculum-building.

**REFLECTION**

As a result of this project children’s vocabulary and phonemic awareness improved. I observed this improvement in the class where students displayed greater comfort engaging in developing literacy skills. They became really excited seeing themselves in the reading materials. The parents were also very eager to contribute. For me, this project illustrated the importance of selecting culturally relevant resources for junior and senior kindergarten classrooms—in a sense it confirmed what most teachers already know but sometimes think there is not enough time to do. It is important for teachers to see this as part of their everyday curriculum, not as extra work.

I hope that other teachers can build on the efforts of this project and bring theory into action in practical ways in the classroom. It is especially important to bring culturally relevant resources at the elementary level—not only at times of celebrations but through action that involves parents. My hope as a classroom teacher in an urban setting is to build on this experience by including the stories of families that parents and children create and poems written by students, and by making books not only in English but also in the language of the students. The reading book bag project shows that the experiences of students can be validated when they are full participants in the teaching and learning process.

Collaboration with other teachers is an important aspect of this work. I recommend that teachers taking on similar project work with other teachers so that their efforts can be shared. The project fostered inclusion not only in the classroom but also in the school because students from various immigrant communities shared their stories.

One of the project’s challenges was that some parents did not have a digital camera. I recommend that funds be made available to purchase classrooms resources such as digital cameras that can be readily used by students. Also, an afternoon where parents could learn photography skills would build relationship with parents by bringing them into the school and involving their children in the learning experience.

This inquiry revealed for me that the given curriculum can be modified and adapted to include the lived experiences of students, which are not ordinarily included. As a result, student engagement and success can be enhanced. This project affirmed the students and the knowledge that they bring.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the students and parents of Flemington Public School for making this project possible and adding to my own understanding of culturally pedagogy in the early years.

BIO

Dianne Chin, a kindergarten teacher at Flemington Public School, works in an inner-city school with students who come from diverse backgrounds. She earned a BEd and MEd at York University.

Ann Lopez, a faculty member in the Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education at OISE, University of Toronto, is currently the acting academic director of the Initial Teacher Education program. She has a doctorate in Curriculum Studies from the University of Toronto, and she teaches courses in educational administration and leadership.
A low student engagement in school appears to be correlated with a higher incidence of emotional and behavioural disorders (Canadian Public Health Association, 2003). This research indicates that approaches to dealing with inappropriate student behaviour, such as helping students feel supported and accepted at school, may contribute to improving learning and behaviour and help students stay in school (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). As Skiba (2001) notes, linguistically and culturally diverse students tend to encounter punitive disciplinary practices.

The Flemington Public School community is culturally diverse, and many students have special needs and Individual Education Plans. Some of these students encounter challenges with academic achievement, and they behave in ways that make it difficult for them to attain their full potential. I teach a Grade 4 and 5 life skills class that assists students who require behavioural support so they can be successful at school and become more engaged in the learning process. I have seen that my students face behavioural as well as academic challenges.
The aim of this project was to increase the engagement and academic achievement of students assigned to the behavioural class. To do so, I wanted to use an alternative approach to discipline, a process I call “differentiated discipline,” along with culturally relevant instructional strategies. This meant I would try to be proactive, engaging, and caring and, at the same time, establish firm expectations for each student: keeping in mind that, historically, schools intervene in students’ challenging behaviour in reactive and punitive ways (Liaupsin, Joiulette, & Scott, 2005). Osher and colleagues (2004) suggest that a proactive approach focused on the children’s social and behavioural development is based on the notion that behaviours are learned and can therefore be unlearned. During this project, while finding ways to engage students academically, I developed a differentiated discipline approach, one that focused on their strengths, while addressing—in a warm, firm, caring way—the behaviours that prevented their leaning and the learning of others.

In my Grade 4 and 5 life skills classroom, students range in age from 10 to 11. There were eight students in the class: four in Grade 4, two in Grade 5, one in Grade 2, one in Grade 3. Even though this was called a Grade 4/5 split class, the Grades 2 and 3 were working at grade level. Usually, the students stay in this specialized classroom for at least two years. The demographic makeup of the class was two white students, one male from the United States, and one female from Kazakhstan, one Asian male who is Canadian and whose parents are Asian and Jamaican; the other five students were African Canadian with Jamaican parentage. The school community is quite diverse, with a large number of Somali and Jamaican immigrants. The two white students were not from the community and were bussed in, as this was the only behavioural classroom in their family of schools1 that met their needs. The other students live in a low-income and subsidized housing area in the community. The students were in this class because they had been identified as requiring behavioural support; they had ongoing behavioural issues and academic underachievement.

In this classroom context, I was interested in using an approach I call “culturally relevant differentiated discipline” to support my classroom management strategies. This concept is based in the framework of the “warm demander” (Irvine & Fraser, 1998; Kleinfeld, 1975; Ware, 2006). The warm demander approach to discipline includes working from a firm, no-nonsense orientation in interactions with students. In this approach teachers use stern voice tones, word choices, and demeanours that clearly convey their expectations for student behaviours. Gordon (1998) suggests that observers may see the warm demander disciplinary style as harsh, but studies within the black community frequently show that the teachers’ actions demonstrate care and concern.

The following questions guided this project:

- What is the impact of culturally relevant approaches on classroom management that’s geared toward improving student behaviour?
- How might culturally relevant instructional strategies increase student engagement and learning?

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1 A group of schools in a TDSB cluster
**PROCESS**

**Parental involvement**

During this project I reflected deeply on my classroom strategies. I also sought ways that could support parents to improve their children’s achievement and reduce the incidence of inappropriate behaviours at school. I spoke with about 50 percent of the parents, sharing my concerns and the strategies that I was thinking about. Involving the parents was integral to my approach, as research has shown that when school practices support the home practices, student outcomes improve (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

During the first year of the project I invited parents to the school so they could learn more about the identification that their child had received. Some parents did not like the fact that their child had been placed in a behavioural class because of issues of labelling and negative stereotypes. In fact, their fears are supported by research that suggests a large number of racialized students are in special education classes (Munroe, 2005). As well as the “behavioural” label, the students had labels such as learning disability and attention deficit.

During my talks with parents I outlined my approach in the classroom, and this helped them understand. Then the parents became supportive and bought into the notion that their child could learn better with special attention and focus. My rapport with the parents was based on my long tenure at the school.

**Model for discipline and instruction**

The culturally relevant differentiated discipline approach has been used effectively in urban schools with a large racialized student population. During this project I applied the “warm demander” approach along with culturally relevant instructional strategies, including board games, videos, and technology.

I created a model of culturally relevant differentiated discipline with the following key elements: share, support, and reinforce (see Figure 1). These elements do not work in isolation; they interact and inform each other.

**Figure 1. Components of culturally relevant differentiated discipline**
**SHARE.** I started by focusing on strategies to encourage the students in my class to believe that they could do anything if they tried, and it was important for them to try. I began by disrupting the views they had of themselves that were not always positive, and I began to encourage them to see themselves as having the capacity to achieve. Some students complained that I was giving them too much work, as they were not always asked to work hard. At the beginning of the year I shared with the students the classroom rules and my goals and expectations for their success (Bondy, Ross, Gallingane, & Hambacher, 2007). The classrooms rules were developed collaboratively with the students. I also shared areas of struggle in my own life to let the students know that it is okay to make mistakes. I also taught behavioural skills such as conflict resolution and behavioural self-monitoring. Through sharing, we developed trust with each other. I took time to get to know the children individually, encouraging and reinforcing them to make positive choices in the classroom, choices that did not interfere with their learning. It was a hard sell at times because some students were not accustomed to being positively reinforced; however, with constant repetition and by getting them to believe in themselves, we made progress.

**REINFORCE.** Positive behaviours were constantly reinforced in my class. I recognized and rewarded positive behaviours using firm reprimands when appropriate (Brown, 2003). Each child was seen as different, and I worked with the class on strategies to support positive behaviours and to respond to inappropriate behaviours. This included providing time for them to speak with me about the inappropriate behaviour and how to prevent its reoccurrence. Positive behaviours were reinforced each day with the support of the child and youth worker (CYW) who had been assigned to the class to support students in their learning. This personal approach to classroom management was proactive, not reactive. It took some time, but the students began to see and understand how negative behaviours were getting in the way of their learning. By valuing the knowledge that they brought, and by using culturally relevant stories and texts and a variety of instructional tools such as games and technology, I was able to infuse a culturally relevant approach in both instruction and discipline. I incorporated various kinds of educational games and movies into the lessons, and students could use the classroom’s computers for different activities.

Applying the notion of differentiated instruction, I differentiated my teaching in terms of its content, process, product, and, most importantly, the environment. For example, the content was differentiated by the use of games, which I had not done before. The games were not part of a reward system but were intertwined with the lessons for each day. The process was differentiated in that some students worked on their own, or I worked with students individually or with the support of the CYW. The classroom environment was differentiated through the use of various seating arrangements; students didn’t sit in rows for long periods, but were placed in small groups on mats and spread out in various sections of the room. We used games such as Scrabble to enhance the students’ literacy skills and Monopoly to teach business skills. I worked with the students one-on-one to ensure they achieved academic success. We examined issues such as climate change through movies, and students were encouraged to bring in books and artefacts from home.
**SUPPORT.** As well as receiving emotional support in the classroom from me and the CYW, the students were supported at home by their parents who had been consulted at the start of the project. I provided the students with constant support by calling home to inform parents of positive accomplishments at school. The parents were involved in the process. I talked with the parents on an ongoing basis about the progress of each child. We worked on the idea of respecting each student’s right to learn. The students needed to get comfortable with the notion of being in the same space with other children and also learning how to collaborate within the classroom.

**LEARNING**

As this project unfolded, I collected evidence of learning through my observations and reflective notes. I made notes each day of the strategies that I used and the ways that the students responded. I also made notes about what I was learning from the project. I had insights not only on how I can better serve students who are deemed in need of behavioural and emotional support but also on the value of student and parent participation. Research suggests that for students with behavioural challenges increased participation in academically engaging activities leads to a reduction in disruptive and off-task behaviours (Sutherland, Alder, & Gunther, 2003). I observed that the students stayed on-task longer, dealt with conflicts in more positive ways, and became more interested in academic work. The students’ overall academic achievement improved, and the number of incidents of negative behaviour in the classroom was reduced. While the students continued to have behavioural issues, there were fewer incidents between students that resulted in students being sent to the office. On occasion, they were able to work through minor issues with the support of the CYW and me. The students became keener to attend class because they looked forward to the variety of planned activities; so there was a noticeable reduction in absences. While their numeracy skills did not improve, their literacy skills in terms of oral and written communication did increase over the previous year.

During parent-teacher interviews, and when I had reason to call home or when they saw me in the school, parents expressed how much they liked the activities that we were doing in class. They felt involved in their child’s learning process and appreciated the caring approach in the classroom. They felt this made a difference in the lives of the students. Students were not just being punished for inappropriate behaviours; they were being taught how to take responsibility and change the behaviour.

**PROFESSIONAL LEARNING**

This project taught me the value of critical reflection. To achieve the goals I had established for the project, I had to be realistic and acknowledge the tensions and challenges that I faced in the classroom, school, and community. My professional development has allowed me to reflect on my own teaching and make the necessary changes so I could rethink and redirect my teaching practice.
My greatest challenge was to allow myself to realize that I had to take every day as a new beginning, because I never knew what each day was going to be like. Each student could be different from one day to the next depending on what was happening at home. On a daily basis I looked at the issues facing my students and reminded myself of the behaviours of a culturally relevant teacher. For me, it was important to get to know the community and understand the issues that the students brought to the classroom. My main goal was to stay true to my philosophy as an educator—being inclusive in my approach—and also my goal for my students, which was to convince them that “equity is not always equality”: each one of them is unique and different and has different needs. I have to use different methods that address their specific strengths and needs, and I have to get them to develop study habits as well as appropriate behaviours that are conducive to their success.

As well as its many successes, this project had challenges. There were times when the CYW and I had different notions of ways to deal with disruptive behaviours, and this brought tensions that had to be recognized and worked through. Also, absences by some students affected their progress and challenged us to think of ways to support their learning.

**REFLECTION**

This project has implications for the ways that classroom teachers can work with students who are deemed “behavioural.” It shows that when they experience academic success positive change can occur in their behaviour. It also shows the importance of differentiated instruction; making classroom activities relevant to the students motivates them. As a result of this project, I recommend that more attention be given to the kind of pedagogy and instruction used in behavioural classes, and that the approach be reassessed to focus less on discipline and punishing inappropriate behaviours. Instead, proactive teaching approaches that are culturally relevant can be used to reinforce expected classroom behaviours and expectations, thereby reducing the incidence of students’ inappropriate behaviour. Schools, particularly in low-income communities, might consider selecting suitable resources to enhance engagement and learning.
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BIO

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Building an Inclusive Community: Thinking, Feeling, and Caring Deeply through the Arts

Christine Jackson

THE ARTS AS INCLUSIONARY TEACHING PRACTICE

The arts—dance, drama, media and visual arts—provide teachers with effective practices for cultivating classroom communities that are caring, open, and inclusive. When we invite students into an arts experience, we invite their minds and hearts to engage with ideas and with each other. In the process, students learn to share what they really think and feel, and they hear and see what their peers really think and feel. This sharing occurs by using a wide range of symbol systems: images, shapes in space, metaphors, gestures, objects, colour, and sound, to name a few. The arts provide a rich and varied landscape of expression in which there is no right or wrong answer; there are only shades and hues and layers of meaning. Once students realize that their thoughts and feelings can be safely expressed, and that their contributions add to the richly shaded and layered tapestry of the classroom’s collective arts expression, a caring, open, and inclusive classroom is born.
THE ARTS AS CRITICAL MULTILITERACIES

In an arts-based classroom, multiple points of view and multiple modalities for expression are encouraged. An arts-based curriculum sends students the following messages about learning:

- Let’s think this through together.
- Let’s express all of our individual thoughts, feelings, and ideas in a variety of ways so that we can better understand each other and the topic or issue we are exploring.
- Let’s grow together in our understanding—honouring and respecting multiple points of view, and learning across our varied experiences.
- Let’s communicate our understanding to the world in an interesting way.
- Let’s use our new understandings to make change in the world.

An arts-based curriculum has high expectations for higher order thinking and communication, and traditional forms of reading and writing are not privileged over all other forms of communication. When purposefully selected and used, media, dance, drama, visual arts, and spoken word are valid, effective modalities for representing and communicating meaning. The arts are inclusive because they empower students, giving voice to their questions, their understandings, and their ever-changing and evolving personal stories.

DRAMA AT GREY OWL PUBLIC SCHOOL

“seeing underneath, behind and beyond texts” (Luke, 2004)

Participating teachers at Grey Owl identified the arts as an important aspect of inclusive education. With the support of the TDSB arts department, they set about a collaborative inquiry project in three classrooms. The project was guided by the following questions:

- How might drama empower students who struggle with traditional pencil-and-paper tasks to communicate their ideas effectively?
- What forms of questioning and what forms of drama can be used to engage all students in creative and critical thinking? How can we effectively engage all students more deeply in meaning-making with complex visual and print texts?
- In what ways can drama help all students feel like they are contributing, valued members of an inclusive community? In particular, how can drama serve and engage our most underserved students?
INTEllIGING THE STORY: THE FLOWER

We chose The Flower by John Light as our anchor text. The book’s beautiful imagery and ambiguous themes invite students to inquire, investigate, and co-construct meaning through a series of guided arts-based explorations. Before the participating teachers introduced the story in three Grade 4 and 5 classrooms, students were engaged in an open-ended discussion of beauty and flowers. They were asked, What is beauty? Where do you find beauty in your life?

Each student was given a flower to study and responded to following questions:

- What do you see when you look closely?
- What do you feel?
- What do you appreciate about flowers?
- In what ways might flowers be considered dangerous?

Such questions are provocations and also inclusive invitations to multiple points of view. I have posed these questions to many groups of students, and always I find that students engage enthusiastically. Over time, their responses deepened:

- “Beauty is inside and outside.”
- “Sometimes you can’t see beauty, unless you try really hard.”
- “Flowers can look pretty, and still be poison.”
- “If someone gives you flowers, it might mean they love you or it might mean they did something bad to you.”

The teachers used the compelling images in the book to introduce the story. They asked the students to go on “a gallery walk” to visit five illustrations in the picture book, and to linger with the image that most intrigued their curiosity. In small groups, the students generated a list of questions about their chosen image. Then they identified the top three most pressing and most important questions they wanted to make sure would be answered through our drama explorations. These questions were charted, and I assured the students that their curiosity would be satisfied when we co-constructed answers to their questions by stepping—through drama—into the world of the story and the characters who inhabit that world.

Inclusionary practice. Open-ended questions invite multiple perspectives. Students’ interests and ideas are included and woven into the design of the lesson. Multiple formats for response are provided, including whole group discussion, partner talk, individual reflection, writing and picture making, interviewing of individual students. These approaches ensure that all students’ perspectives are included. One teacher said, “The questions that grew out of the drama led me to a greater insight into how my students think, their life experiences, and how they view the world.”
INVESTIGATING THE STORY

Students co-constructed the world of the story through a variety of drama and literacy strategies: tableaux, movement and partner role-play, writing-in-role in different formats, poetry writing, and visual representation through a mural (see Figures 1 and 2). These strategies allowed students to give voice to the characters and objects whose voices were absent in the story. They explored issues of power and powerlessness, and in a very concrete way engaged directly in the processes defined by Luke (2004, Foreword) as critical literacy: “Critical literacy involves second guessing, reading against the grain, asking hard and harder questions, seeing underneath, behind, and beyond texts, trying to see and ‘call’ how these texts establish and use power over us, over others, on whose behalf, in whose interests.”

For example, the students described the world of the story as represented by the illustrator as “grey, dull, lifeless, boring, and shut down.” Through role-play, the students met various people who inhabited this world: the mayor of the city, the apartment dwellers, the oldest person in the city, the head librarian. These multiple perspectives and conflicting points of view conjured a complex world of authoritarian rule, the absence of beauty, and the persistence of conformity. How can one find beauty in such a world, how can one assert her or his individuality, and how can one effect change? Big questions were posed, big dramatic commitment was catalyzed, and every member of the classroom community was included and engaged in this important inquiry.

Inclusionary practice. All students were invited to question and theorize. They were involved in a process of detection and inclusion of missing voices in the story. They engaged in listening and crafting multiple points of view. Student voice, both in and out of role were respected, and kinesthetic and interpersonal learning styles were honoured. According to one teacher,

When working together on The Flower, I saw a new and more clearly focused way of getting drama to come alive and become a meaningful tool for gauging a student’s comprehension…. Drama and the arts gave “K” a comfort zone when it came to written expression, and what the comfort of safety did for her confidence on that particular assignment was a critical lesson for me as her teacher.
The exploration of *The Flower* was unique in each of the three classrooms. One class became very interested in child labour laws; another class wanted to investigate the rights of the child; and another class committed to beautifying their classroom, and fresh flowers became a weekly classroom purchase. Student and teacher reflections and my own observations confirm that the arts play a critical role in establishing an inclusive classroom. This is a space where student voice is included, validated, and honoured, where multiple points of view are respected, and where learning includes multiple ways of gaining and communicating knowledge and understanding.

The following poem was collaboratively composed by a group of Grade 4 and 5 students as an extension of their drama exploration. Just as questioning guided our investigation, they used questions as a structural device for their poem.

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A World of Grey
Forever changed to a world of colour
Where did this blast of colour come from?

One Flower
With the power to change our ways.
What makes flowers so special?

One Book
With the power to release secrets.
What could these secrets be that are held in this book?

One Individual
With the power to never give up.
What if the world had a fresh start?
What makes someone never give up?
Can flowers keep people free?
How could we make the world a better place?
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Maxine Greene (2007) states that she wants all students to be capable of critical thinking, outrage, and wild surmise (pp. 3–4). The students at Grey Owl definitely grew in their capacity to think critically, feel deeply, infer, speculate, wonder, and take action. They co-construted a fictional world riddled with injustice, and then analyzed the impact of such forces in today’s world. These young students experienced moral outrage at the impact of oppressive forces, and explored possible ways to take action against such oppression. They also transferred their learning from the fictional world of the drama to the real world of their school. Their actions, which differed according to each group’s experience and their own sense of purpose, included beautifying the classroom, planting a garden, writing a poem, hanging a colourful mural in the hallway, and establishing a classroom charter of rights and responsibilities. Each class participated in the project as a collective, inclusive community through shared experiences and a unified sense of purpose. As a result, teachers and the students grew in their appreciation of the arts. One teacher said, “My respect and value of the arts as a means of personal and academic expression was renewed through the experience.”
TEACHER INQUIRY

The teacher inquiry at Grey Owl Public School continues, with an ongoing investigation of the three guiding questions related to student empowerment, effective questioning, and the use of drama to cultivate a caring, inclusive community. They continue to share with one another as a community of practitioners with an interest in the arts as a critical element of inclusive pedagogy. The power of a provocative, open-ended question to invite multiple interpretations has been a key learning. Additionally, the teachers have come to understand that explorations of social justice and equity issues through the arts enhances understanding, openness, and respect—elements that are fundamental and essential to inclusive education.

A number of resources will continue to support the teachers in their inquiry into arts as an inclusive practice. The teachers will also rely upon each other and the TDSB arts department, as well as a variety of print and digital resources. For example, materials created for the Council of Ontario Drama and Dance Educators (CODE, 2010) will be used and adapted by the teachers at Grey Owl. These materials could serve all teachers who are ready to use drama and dance as methodologies for cultivating deep thinking, caring, and inclusive classroom communities.

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I am grateful for the contributions of Rita Dublin, Wrensford Simmonds, and Debbie Nyman.

BIO

Christine Jackson is the program coordinator of the arts for the TDSB. She is currently in a PhD program in Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at OISE, with a focus on the arts and inclusive education, and she is an instructor in OISE’s pre-service teacher education program.
Raising Awareness of Student Learning Disabilities: Implications for Learning

Erica Cameron in collaboration with Beverly Caswell

As a special education teacher, I am always surprised that my students rarely understand what learning differences they have or why they are in my class. For the most part, I encounter disgruntled students who are unhappy to be in a special education classroom because they feel “dumb” and don’t understand why they are there. The students in my Grade 7 and 8 classes have not been educated about their own learning differences, the kinds of experiences that accompany these differences, and strategies they can use to make learning more accessible to them. Even at age 13, the students have no idea what their exceptionality is or what is the difference between ADHD and autism, and they are bitter about being in a class that’s commonly perceived to be for less-intelligent students.
I viewed the Inclusive Schools pilot project as an opportunity to delve into this issue and help students change their perception of what it means to learn differently. Tanya Titchkosky (2011) offers an ongoing invitation to “to find promise in disability, not despite it” in order to “blur the dividing line between possibility and limit” (p. 16). I think it is crucial that we pay close attention to the language we use with our students. Although I was educated to think in terms of disabilities and disorders (e.g., learning disability), I speak to my students only about differences. It is easier for them to take pride in being unique; it's difficult to take pride in being somehow broken. As a student of mine declared in her public service announcement on learning differences, “Different is the new normal.” As Titchkosky points out, “Inclusive educational practices today signal a time when people can become wary of a singular version of disability in our classrooms, a version that sees disability as always a problem and never a promise” (p. 16).

As professional educators, we are responsible for helping our students recognize, understand, and implement plans to manage their own learning. We have the knowledge to help students develop awareness and make sense of their experiences so they can better understand them. We need to prepare our students not only to develop an awareness of ways in which they can best learn but also to co-create the best learning environment to meet their needs.

The purpose of my inquiry project was to educate students about learning differences—their own and those of others in the class—and how they can accommodate for themselves. Achieving this aim would move students from seeing themselves as “dumb” to seeing themselves as worthy and contributing members of the school culture and community. I wanted to represent “disability in diverse ways, as something other than a condition that comes with particular students” (Titchkosky, 2011, p. 18). I wanted special education students to be included in their own programming and to increase their involvement within the school community.

For this project, I was particularly interested in finding out how to help students see that a learning disability is different from a specific condition that a person comes to school with. How could I raise students’ awareness of learning differences to help them take charge of their learning and see themselves as valuable contributors to school and society? I wanted to see if this awareness-raising could help foster an inclusive environment.

This work grew from Year 2 of the Inclusive Schools project, when our school took on the study of ableism as part of our Teaching-Learning Critical Pathway. As part of that initiative, the school librarian and Inclusive Schools project liaison introduced students to ideas of ableism through the “fair or unfair” scenarios. (See Caswell and Tufts article, pp. 105–115).
PROCESS

Understanding learning disability

I began the school year by simply addressing the concept of learning disabilities (LD). I strived to make my students’ individual learning differences as straightforward and non-threatening as possible. My goal was to empower them to become ambassadors for themselves and for all students with learning differences. We began the school year with a definition of learning disabilities:

Learning Disabilities refer to a number of disorders which may affect the acquisition, organization, retention, understanding or use of verbal or nonverbal information. These disorders affect learning in individuals who otherwise demonstrate at least average abilities essential for thinking and/or reasoning (Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, 2002).

As a class, we talked about this definition, and I highlighted two important factors. First, a student diagnosed with a learning disability exceptionality has an intellectual ability in the average range or above. I made it clear that students in my class all met the criteria of average or above average intelligence. Second, I explained that a learning disability does not prevent higher order thinking (i.e., reasoning and thinking); we may just have to take a different road to get there. On hearing these statements, most students expressed surprise and didn’t believe me. This was new information for them, and they felt upset that in their school lives, they had been subjected to ridicule for being in special education classrooms.

Next, I offered a general introduction to a variety of learning disabilities. I asked if they would like to know their learning disability profile, and they unanimously answered in the affirmative. Then we began learning about our differences. I started with picture books about all of the different types of exceptionalities that may exist. We engaged in read-alouds, sharing personal experiences, and connecting to the characters in the books. There are fabulous books on the market about learning differences, especially in the area of ADHD and dyslexia, but there are not nearly enough on general learning differences.

I had one-on-one discussions with students about their own exceptionalities and what that meant for them. I explained what it was, the symptoms, and the strategies that may be helpful. This was the “ah ha” moment for many students, and one which I found truly rewarding. This was when students realized that there was a reason for their actions, and there were strategies they could use to manage themselves.

For example, students with ADHD who may have commonly experienced a “three o’clock meltdown”—which often resulted in a visit to the principal’s office—reached a turning point when they realized the meltdowns weren’t because they were weak or stupid (as they previously believed); they shut down because six hours focused on school work took a considerable amount energy and effort, and they often needed some “down time.”
Researching a variety of learning disabilities

The students in my learning disabilities class, which we dubbed “learning with distinction,” took ownership of the way they learned and wanted to fundamentally change the school’s perception of people who learn differently. To begin, students did online research into a variety of learning disabilities and were able to see themselves in what they were reading. Through that, they were able to figure out with accuracy what their own and other’s disabilities entailed. Students then created slogans for public service announcements. These were designed to promote acceptance of people with LD.

To my surprise, almost every student chose to validate the learning disability of someone else in the class. Students with reading differences were advocating for students with autism; students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) were advocating for students with visual impairments; students with attention deficit disorder (ADD) were advocating for people with visual-spatial difficulties. Amazing. Social status was suspended, all were on equal footing, and empathy abounded.

One student, for example, chose to create a poster about visual impairment in honour of a student in the classroom he had been known to tease on occasion. His slogan read “I may be blind/have a vision impairment, but when you make fun of me I see your true colours.”

Creating superheroes

Next, we honed our computer literacy skills by creating online graphic superheroes, based on the book ABC Superheroes. The catch was that the superheroes had to be based on a learning difference. The students had to think of the positive qualities of a particular difference and work that into the hero’s profile. The students created descriptions that were playful and insightful. “ADHD man,” for example, was able to circle the earth three times in a split second. The humour of this did not evade the student who wrote it. Another student with ADHD dubbed his hero “empathy man” who could read the emotions of others like a book. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1. Superheroes
Creating a poster campaign

Our last and largest undertaking sprang from an article in the Toronto Star. The article spoke of a local artist who mocked American Apparel clothing ads by staging similar shots featuring a model with a curved spine. She was speaking against the clothing giant’s claim that their models are “regular” everyday people. Although I intended this merely as an interesting read-aloud for discussion, it turned into a much larger project. “Miss, we have to take this a step further. We want to do a campaign.” The students latched onto the idea that, as people with learning differences, they were regular, everyday people and thought we should do a similar project showcasing our new-found pride in our learning profiles.

I went to work fitting their interests into their Individual Education Plans. The students’ first job was to create slogans for their posters that addressed their own learning difference. We studied American Apparel ads to get some background and found the ones we wanted to portray. Students had a lot of fun turning our classroom into a photo shoot: we brought in a big white sheet for the backdrop, and students took roles based on their expertise. Their roles included photographers, project managers, fashion consultants, Photoshop experts, and clothing scouts (some students had American Apparel hoodies that they loaned to the photo shoot). Before doing the photo shoot, students had to come up with copy: written text for their advertising message.

The students knew that I had epilepsy and invited me to be part of it. We even discovered a few teachers on staff who also experienced learning disabilities, and they graciously joined our campaign by posing and writing slogans for their own posters. These teachers became excellent role models for the students. (See Figure 2.)

Figure 2. Teacher Erica Cameron’s “Carleton Apparel” poster
Following are some of the slogans in the Carleton Apparel posters:

- LD isn’t contagious, acceptance is.
- There’s a difference between being lazy and saving face.
- Plain and Simple. I have a general learning disability, meaning I am good in some things and not so good in others. Not so hard to understand, right? That’s just plain and simple.
- Meet DP. I have a reading disorder, but I can whip up a drawing in no time.
- Reading a difficult word is like a cat got my tongue and it got twisted up. But I stretch out the word so I can pronounce it properly.

Our classroom became a hub of activity in the school, and we had students from other classes banging on our door, wanting to join in. By the time we were ready to post our hard work around the school, the students became somewhat hesitant to “go public” with their differences. They wanted the posters laminated out of fear that other students in the school might deface them. Although they were nervous, they said the whole idea was to change students’ perceptions of LD. We put the posters up throughout the hallways of the school and set up a bulletin board in the front hallway. Before we were even finished setting up the bulletin board, we had students from other classes visiting our room, commenting on how “cool” and “boss” the posters were and asking us questions like, “What is ADHD?” Throughout the project, students in my classroom experienced instant celebrity status in their own school, receiving compliments and great interest in their work from students, teachers, and parents.

**Public service announcements**

We did a follow-up educational campaign on the school announcements—“These are our stories”—spotlighting a different learning disability each day and providing more detailed information about what that disability entailed.

**LEARNING**

As this project unfolded, I collected evidence of learning through observations, assessing student work samples, and conducting semi-structured interviews with students.

In my experience, students became more self-confident, took ownership of their learning, gained control of their own education, were able to implement strategies and strengthen their metacognitive skills to improve learning, and increased their level of achievement as shown by improvements in their oral, written, and graphic communication. Furthermore, students began to see themselves in a new light. They erased a lot of stigma around learning disability and that helped to alter an entire school culture around the topic of special education.
In the words of one of my students,

> The work we did last year helped me feel more comfortable with my learning DIFFERENCE because I learned that it’s okay to be in a small class, let alone have a different way to learn and get through life. Not only that, but with my ADHD I feel more open and free, willing to say it now, and not feel ashamed because as long as I know I’m still as human as anyone else, then that’s all that matters.

During the superheroes activity, students’ higher order thinking and self-reflection were impressive, as was their sense of empathy and their ability to turn the stigma of disability on its head. During the poster campaign, a few students discovered they had terrific photography skills, and they all learned how to use Adobe® Photoshop, and most ended up making two or three different posters.

Students began to develop an understanding of their learning disability. They realized how their condition might affect their behaviour and that there were strategies to manage themselves. For example, a student with ADHD who learned about how that manifested itself in a variety of individuals said, “That’s why I start misbehaving at three o’clock and I can’t handle myself and I’m running around and I end up in the principal’s office. Now at three o’clock, I might ask, “Can I just go on the computer?” or “Can I just go and read?”

It was amazing to see the behaviour between 3:00 and 3:30 p.m. change from anti-social to productive. Students expressed interest in helping other students, or some asked for a little structured computer time to look up a current media interest. I now have students who visit me frequently and tell me about their triumphs in high school. When they do not understand materials because of the way it is being taught, they are able to approach teachers and explain their learning styles and offer suggestions for alternative assignment formats. Although there are challenges in bringing sensitive issues to the forefront in a classroom of adolescents, I think this project demonstrates the value of teaching students about their own learning disabilities.

There is no reason that a student with ADHD in Grade 8 should become agitated and self-deprecating when experiencing disorganization or drifting thoughts. When our students with reading difficulties select books that are too challenging, we need to prepare them to recognize this and exchange the book for one that’s more suitable to their needs or, better yet, provide the support or adaptive technologies necessary so students can enjoy the book they have chosen. Too often, unprepared students shut down, feeling that their own inadequacies have simply been reinforced.

The parents of our students need more than a photocopied handout to help them help their children develop comprehensive knowledge of their differences. They need more guidance to be able to create specific strategies that work for their child and that can be carried through into each new classroom. Open lines of communication between parent and teacher start at the beginning of the year. Our curriculum nights aren’t just to rhyme off the curriculum expectations we will be teaching; parents can look that up online themselves. It is our job to educate parents about the classroom and school systems that are in place to support their children. I start with a PowerPoint™ presentation on LD that a group of students made for me a few years ago in my home-school
Deepening Inclusive and Community-Engaged Education

program. It covers symptoms and behaviours, both from the textbook and from student perspectives, as well as strategies. I open up a parent-teacher blog for the rest of the year for discussions and a place where I can post great articles and links relevant to the parents of the students I teach. The dialogue and education benefits both sides. The parents educate me about how the LD presents itself in the home and other settings, and I provide background information and strategies.

REFLECTION

Over my career in special education, I have learned some simple effective strategies such as posting pictures of successful people with learning differences accompanied by a short description of their individual challenges. Students are surprised to learn that the founder and CEO of IKEA, Ingvar Kamprad, has a reading disability. As well, I constantly strive to find situations wherein I am the underdog, allowing students to educate me. Game systems, trends in adolescent clothing, and current slang are easy places for this to happen. I allow myself to make mistakes in areas that are not my forte so as to allow the students to openly review and explain these concepts to me. I explain why it is hard for me to understand, and they strategize how to get past my obstacles so that I do understand. Without realizing it, the students accommodate and modify for my learning needs while developing communication and organizational skills for themselves. They easily understand how to transfer these skills to their own learning obstacles once they’ve used me as the guinea pig a few times. Developing learning-buddy relationships with primary students is also a great way to achieve this outcome.

This project has given me the opportunity to share my work in a variety of conference presentations, including Celebrating Linguistic Diversity Conference at OISE in April 2011.

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BIO

Erica Cameron has been teaching with the TDSB for 11 years, with half of her career focused on students with special needs. She has taught Grade 7 and 8 Core, LEAP, ESL, HSP, LD ISP and MID programs. Recently, Erica completed her MA at Ryerson University.

Beverly Caswell is the director of the Robertson Program for Inquiry-based Teaching in Mathematics and Science at the Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study, OISE, University of Toronto. An associate member of OISE’s Centre for Urban Schooling and a founding coordinator of OISE’s Inner City Option, Bev was teacher liaison for the Inclusive Schools project at Carleton Village Public School.
Many students face bullying in school, and this creates a negative learning experience. Flemington, like other public schools, has issues with bullying, particularly in the schoolyard during lunchtime and afternoon recess. As a teacher, I have seen a lot of fighting and physical bullying among students, and I have become very concerned about this behaviour, particularly in the schoolyard. Parents are also concerned about bullying and fighting during lunchtime and recess. According to Craig and Pepler (1997), children report that bullying occurs frequently at school and involvement of peers in reducing this problem is important.

This project emerged from my involvement in a professional learning series on participatory action research and culturally relevant pedagogy. Organized by the Centre for Urban Schooling at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), this learning series examined critical approaches to schooling. Critical participatory action research promotes change and has particular impact on students from marginalized groups (Fine, Burns, Payne, & Torres, 2004). Flemington Public School has a diverse student population, and culturally relevant pedagogy has proved to be an effective way to include the cultures, languages, and experiences that diverse students bring to the classroom—with the aim to increase their engagement and academic achievement (Irvine & Armento, 2001; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). One of the tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy is to involve the community and give students more voice in the running of the school.
As a classroom teacher, I was aware of how behaviour issues from the schoolyard carry over into the classroom and impact learning. I wanted to use a social justice and culturally relevant approach to deal with these issues and bring them to the foreground in my teaching. I felt that the Playground Activity Leaders program (PALS) would be a good way to do this and would help the school successfully deal with this problem of schoolyard bullying. To get the project off the ground I met with Flemington’s principal and staff, OISE teacher candidates, and Ann Lopez, the OISE liaison. After the discussion, the school principal and social worker and I decided that the PALS program would be a good vehicle to involve students and support them in taking ownership of the issue. Grades 4 and 5 students took an active part in the PALS program. They saw PALS as a way of challenging the bullying problem during recess and at lunchtime. It was also a way for them to have a voice in the process.

PALS is a playground activity leaders program that encourages all children to participate in activities regardless of their gender, age, or ability. The objectives of the program are to (a) increase physical activity, (b) decrease conflict and reduce the incidence of playground bullying, and (c) provide leadership opportunities for students. Public health nurses train staff and students to implement the program and provide ongoing support.

When the teachers decided to use the PALS program, we also decided to inquire into the process to better understand the effects of the program. The following questions guided our inquiry:

- How can bullying situations in the schoolyard at recess and lunchtime be decreased?
- How might the staff (teachers, administrators, school staff), parents, and students work together to create a positive school environment?

Additional guidance for this project was provided by the Bullying Prevention and Intervention Policy of the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), which urges schools to develop a framework to enable, support, and maintain a positive school environment. Given the focus on student success and achievement, and the connections between bullying and the potential for low academic performance or dropping out of school, addressing the problem of bullying is essential (Milson & Gallo, 2006).

**PROCESS**

Eight associate teachers1, four teachers, and several teacher candidates from the OISE Inner City Option elementary cohort participated in this project. Associate teachers acted as mentors to the teacher candidates at Flemington. To introduce the project to the entire student body, a “kick-off” assembly was organized. The student leaders and teacher candidates involved in the project outlined the details of the initiative. Teachers selected students from Grades 4 and 5 to form a student council that would support the PALS program. These student leaders were selected according to the following criteria: sense of responsibility, creativity, and overall positive school behaviour (students

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1 Associate teachers are mentor teachers who supervise teacher candidates while on practicum.
who were not seen frequently in the office for discipline issues). They represented the school’s student population and included male and female students. They participated in student council meetings, and they were very supportive of the PALS program. They helped organize the materials that students would use in the playground, and they facilitated classroom discussions about the program.

With the assistance of three associate teachers, I designed a student survey to obtain information about the activities the students wanted to play at recess. The survey included the following activities: hula hoops, skipping rope, red/blue bounce ball, basketball, and soccer. There was additional space for students to add an activity that was not already on the list and to identify the areas around the schoolyard where incidents of bullying frequently occurred.

The teacher candidates and I developed maps of the schoolyard, and we asked students to colour the spots where they thought the most bullying occurred. Members of the student council gathered data, and assisted in mapping the areas that students in the PALS program would focus on.

Involving families in the schooling process is important within a culturally relevant and responsive approach. So for this participatory action research project we included parents in data collection and decision-making. The school involved the parents by asking them to carry on the conversation about bullying with their children at home. For this purpose, teachers gave the students a questionnaire to take home and answer with their parents. The questionnaire asked about their awareness of bullying at school and asked for suggestions on how the issue might be dealt with. The idea was to have children discuss these questions with their parents and then respond to the questionnaire. There were also questions specifically for the parents to respond to. Through the questionnaires we learned about student and parent perceptions about the issue of bullying in the schoolyard.

Based on the survey of what activities students preferred in the schoolyard during lunchtime and recess, another stage of the project involved the creation of student activity baskets. They were created for each class to use in the playground, and they were purchased from school funds raised during the annual fair. A student leader from the student council was assigned to a grade or classroom and was responsible to ensure that the equipment was properly and safely used during recess. They were also responsible for the safe return of the baskets to the classrooms at the end of lunch recess. This was a very good way of involving the student council and also the students who were not part of the PALS program.

The PALS leaders, during recess, encouraged and guided students in using the equipment in the schoolyard. They also modelled how to share the equipment with each other, how to play cooperatively and fairly, and to have fun. The games in the activity basket gave students a new focus during recess.
LEARNING

Data were collected throughout the inquiry through surveys and questionnaires, interviews, and schoolyard observations. Data analysis involved considering which activities the students in the primary and junior grades preferred during recess. The student council took the responsibility for collating the data.

As a result of the project, the opinions of students were taken into account and acted upon, and there were many benefits for students, the school, and the community. Also, the process benefited me as a teacher leader. Three core themes emerged during this project: (a) a reduced incidence of bullying, (b) greater student leadership and empowerment, and (c) strengthened school-community connections.

Reduced incidence of bullying

Overall, the project contributed to the reduction of bullying in the schoolyard as students were engaged in focused activities organized according to the PALS program. The program kept students engaged in outdoor and indoor activities at lunchtime. With the assistance of student leaders, the students found ways to reduce conflicts that arose. According to the principal and office staff, there were fewer reports to the office during lunchtime and recess. Students also said they saw fewer incidents of bullying in the schoolyard and fewer arguments among the students. Teachers on yard duty also reported during staff meetings a reduction in schoolyard conflicts.

The student leaders, teacher candidates, and staff who participated in the project taught the students how to share their equipment, play cooperatively and fairly, and, most importantly at the junior level, have fun playing together. One student commented that the program brought fun back to the playground. The benefits of the program were also felt on inclement weather days when the students had to take recess inside. The activities baskets gave students meaningful activities they could play. Participation in the various activities helped the teaching staff keep minor infractions down.

Usually, conflicts from the schoolyard carried over into the classroom and affected the learning environment. Some teachers noticed fewer infractions in the classrooms right after lunch and felt this was due to the students having guided opportunities to deal with conflicts effectively during lunchtime. One teacher noted, “because of the PALS program and the focus on playing and having fun, the students had a way to work out their differences before coming to the classroom.”

Student leadership and empowerment

Through the PALS program the students at Flemington had a voice in dealing with an issue of concern to them. Students were involved in the planning, decision-making, and implementation of the kind of activities they wanted to play outside and that could decrease problems in the schoolyard.
Because of the PALS program the students were in charge of the activities and enjoyed having a leadership role. They were actively engaged, and learned about good sportsmanship and cooperation. They learned to become leaders of the school and learned how to resolve conflicts that arose among students during activities. They assisted with activities in the gym when there was indoor recess. The student leaders enjoyed being the leaders of the activities because they felt empowered in promoting a safe, caring, and fun environment for their peers. Most important of all, students identified the issues in the schoolyard, offered ideas on how these could be resolved, and took action. One student leader in the PALS program said, “I felt good helping, I like helping.” Because of the program more positive relationships were created among the students as they learned about cooperation, respect, and caring for one another. Student leaders in the PALS program became school announcers. The students were proud of their role in reading the daily announcements, and this was a role that younger students could aspire to.

**Community involvement**

Parents told the principal and staff that they were proud of their children learning leadership skills and learning to play different games. Most of all, they appreciated that the school was serious about reducing the incidence of bullying in the schoolyard and nurturing a safe and caring school environment.

**PROFESSIONAL LEARNING**

As a teacher leader, this project reminded me how important it is to build and communicate a vision by inspiring, challenging, motivating, and empowering students to work collaboratively. Through this project I was able to have greater dialogue with the parents and make a contribution to the school in a way that’s different from the official curriculum. I learned to collaborate effectively with the university by engaging teacher candidates in mutually beneficial ways.

I also learned that engaging in culturally relevant practices is time consuming and requires the commitment of the entire school community. Some staff members did not quite enjoy the process because it meant time was taken away from their other duties. I realized the importance of collaborating with other teachers and establishing critical friends among the staff who could assist with the work. To do this I talked with staff about the overall impact and benefits of the program for the school and particularly about the impact in reducing disciplinary issues through engaging the students during recess. I communicated how important it was for teachers to view this kind of work as part of their daily activities, not something added on.

At the outset, I saw the work of this project as something in addition to my regular teaching activities. Given the demands of the official curriculum, at times it was challenging for me to keep up the level of commitment and intensity needed to ensure the project was successful. As the project progressed, I came to understand that the work of this project needs to be embedded in my daily activities.
I would encourage teachers to view culturally relevant teaching as part of their regular curriculum, not an addition to it. The program continues in the school, and PALS leaders are involved in other activities such as reading the morning announcements.

The project provided me with a professional development opportunity because I came to understand more about culturally relevant pedagogy and I engaged in dialogue with other teachers, university researchers, students, and parents. I enjoyed having a leadership role that gave me an opportunity to organize a research project and see it through to completion.

**REFLECTION**

This project allowed students, staff, teacher candidates, and the community to work together in a trusting environment to address an issue of importance to students. It brought together teachers, administrators, staff, and family members to collaborate in implementing the project. It highlighted for us that issues facing students in urban school settings can be solved by more directly including these students and their communities in the process. For teachers and staff, the project showed ways that collaboration and trust can be built. For parents and the community, the project developed awareness of schoolyard bullying and brought them directly into solving the problem. Perhaps most importantly, students undertook multiple roles and responsibilities that had many benefits. Students become agents of change to reduce the incidence of bullying, and they became involved in problem solving, acting responsibly, and being positive and respectful to one another. This can be a model for other schools who are seeking to address similar problems in their schools.

As the project leader, I recommend that teachers stay committed to finding solutions to deal with student issues and, in doing so, involve students in the process. The PALS program has been shown to be an effective way to deal with bullying issues. Also, by using a culturally responsive and relevant approach, schools in urban settings can successfully deal with pressing student issues. By involving the students in this project, such as having them take responsibility for the equipment and arranging the activities baskets, students did develop a sense of responsibility. Fundamentally, it is important to have a dedicated group of teachers, administrators, staff, and family members to make projects like these successful.

**REFERENCES**


ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the students and parents of Flemington Public School, the staff and school administration, OISE liaison for the Inclusive School project, and the Centre for Urban Schooling for their support in completing this project. Without many critical friends it would not have been possible. Most of all thanks to the PALS student leaders.

BIO

Christy Dell’Agnese, a Grade 3 teacher at Flemington Public School, has been teaching for 25 years. She has fulfilled many Additional Qualification courses, specializing in physical education and special education, and she has completed Principal Qualification courses Part 1 and 2.

Ann Lopez, a faculty member in the Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education at OISE, University of Toronto, is currently the acting academic director of the Initial Teacher Education program. She has a doctorate in Curriculum Studies from the University of Toronto, and she teaches courses in educational administration and leadership.
Each year I try to gain some prior knowledge about the students who will be in my charge. In 2009–2010, I was able to obtain significant insight about the students entering my class as a result of close collaboration with teachers in the intermediate division (Grades 7 and 8). One insight was that many of my prospective Grade 8 students were very vocal and wanted their voices to be heard.

As a teacher it has always been important that my students have a say in their learning and have opportunities to express their views. I am from a school culture in Jamaica where students are involved in debating and public speaking competitions, and I can attest to the immense benefit they gain from this. For the last five years, I have organized a public speaking competition for intermediate students. Confidence, poise, and a general awareness of issues are just a few of the benefits they attain.

I have also read that providing opportunities for students to voice their views and concerns leads to increased engagement, participation, and improved learning (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Irvine, 2002). My goals for the Inclusive Schools project resonate with this perspective. As I considered classroom practices for the upcoming year, an important goal for me was to find a meaningful way to empower my Grade 8 students to speak out and let their voices be heard, and also to enhance their learning on a number of issues.
I was particularly interested in engaging my students in the language arts curriculum through providing greater opportunity to develop oral communication skills. I began a regular forum—called “Speak Out”—where students could express their views on local issues of interest to them. Each class, which averaged 24 students, included students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs), students with different degrees of engagement in the curriculum, and students who were either introverted or extroverted.

When the Speak Out forum began, students volunteered to simply stand and speak on a local issue they felt strongly about. Only about 10 percent of the students participated in this format, so I decided to change the format somewhat to increase student engagement. On a daily basis, we began to share news items from newspapers such as the Toronto Star, and students identified certain local issues that were then brought to the forefront of our classroom discussions. All students were asked to write about the facts surrounding an issue, how they felt about the issue, and whether they agreed or disagreed. Students were then asked to share what they wrote. During this process, I noticed an increase in student participation, yet there were still some students who were a bit reluctant to stand up and share.

At the same time, I was involved in professional development opportunities provided through the Inclusive Schools project in conjunction with the Teaching-Learning Critical Pathways program. In this context teachers were given time to collaborate in planning ways to introduce social justice themes in the classroom. When I introduced themes in the class such as “inclusion” and “conflict and change,” students had a wider range of issues to contend with. I asked them to choose an issue and prepare a three-minute speech to present to the class. Then I supported them in a variety of ways. For example, I made allowances for some students to write much shorter pieces, and for others who were reluctant to write and preferred to just talk. However, it was important for me to keep in mind that differentiation was critical for maximum engagement and student success: this meant providing students with multiple ways into curriculum areas and working to diversify assessment. I continued with this format for a few weeks, and students became more and more comfortable speaking out.

I decided once again to change the format for Speak Out. This time I provided opportunities for students to work and speak in smaller groups. In both of my Grade 8 classes, this led to the introduction of panel discussions and creative controversy structures such as debates.

“Students would benefit more in an inclusive classroom” was one of the topics for debate. This debate focused on whether or not all students—with or without disabilities—should be included in a regular classroom. Students researched different perspectives by reading articles and by interviewing students with learning disabilities about what they feel about being integrated in a regular classroom. The results of the students’ research revealed the many complexities of the issue, and they identified advantages and disadvantages of both the self-contained classroom for students with learning disabilities and also the integrated classroom.
For the panel discussions I divided the entire class into panels of four or five students who would work together to generate questions and areas of interest for further study. Groupings for the panel discussions were well thought out and deliberate. I organized mixed-ability groups to ensure that the strengths of each student were brought to the forefront.

Each group of students chose a topic and worked out questions to discuss in the forum. Following are some of the student-generated questions posed by the moderator during a group presentation on bullying:

- What are the different types of bullying that occur in schools?
- What is one of the top areas where bullying takes place?
  
  To clarify, the moderator rephrased the question as follows: What type of bullying is most common in school? How would you feel if you were being bullied?
- Do you think girls do more verbal bullying than boys?
- Is there something you can do to prevent bullying?
- Why do you think bullies even try to bully?

The questions ranged from lower order to higher order questions as encouraged by my instructions.

One member of each group was assigned the role of moderator. Students worked in small groups to discuss topics such as community violence, elder abuse, boys-only classes, bullying, and the impact of the media on youth. Students sometimes invited a student from another group to be a guest panelist. The rest of the class formed the audience, and they generally participated at the end by asking questions or making comments.

During the panel discussion forum students learned the formal structure and language of panel discussions. For instance, the student moderator for each group welcomed the panelists and asked each member of the panel to introduce themselves. The moderator also conducted the discussion by posing questions and prompting students when necessary. This was aimed at giving the students a better understanding of the issues being discussed. At the end of each discussion, the moderator thanked the panel for their participation, and the audience showed their appreciation through applause.

My students embraced the discussion strategy. When I received the information about the SpeakUp project (Ontario Ministry of Education), it was not difficult to convince the students to use the panel discussion forum they had used in class on a broader scale in the school. SpeakUp offered a chance for students to get involved in making their school a better place to learn and provided them the opportunity to take action on the issues important to them. With my guidance, the students worked out a plan and applied for funding to conduct a series of panel discussions in the school. They brainstormed possible titles, explained their reasons for the titles, and the class voted on the title they felt was most appropriate for the project.
“Our Natural Imperfections” was chosen as the title for the project, which consisted of building communication skills, showing other students the main issues affecting the community, and presenting the ideas of students in various ways. The students prepared the application themselves and were ecstatic when funding was granted.

As planned, the students organized and carried out their first major panel discussion on community violence. Their organizational skills involved (a) deciding on date and time, venue, the appropriate audience, guest speakers, refreshment, logistics, the format of the presentation; (b) making posters to advertise; and (c) communicating with the school principal.

The students invited a guest speaker who had gone through a conviction and had later turned his life around. A letter of invitation was also sent to a police officer. They wanted to include an officer because the police are key to fighting violence and making the community a safer place. The students demonstrated their own creativity in bringing the project to life. As an introduction to the discussion they developed a short skit that dramatized an aspect of community violence. This was well received by the audience. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1. Student planning for panel discussion on community violence
LEARNING

As my project unfolded, I collected evidence of learning through observations, anecdotal records, student reflections, semi-structured interviews, and samples of students’ writing and oral communication.

Each of the learning structures used in this project, including creative controversy, panel discussion, and SpeakUp, served multiple learning goals. Open dialogue with the students made it possible for many perspectives to be heard. It became clear to me that students gained a deeper understanding and awareness of issues, and they also became more tolerant and accepting of the variety of perspectives that surround different issues. They learned that by operating as a community of learners they could work together to collaboratively build awareness and increase their understanding of important issues in society.

The students who participated in this project improved in all strands of the language arts curriculum: oral communication, reading, writing and media. They learned research skills and became more engaged in reading. For example, more students, especially boys who were typically reluctant to read, began reading the newspaper. One student in particular, previously the most disengaged boy in the class, would ask me for the newspaper when I forgot to pick it up in the office.

Students also became able to write longer paragraphs and essays, and they demonstrated more critical thinking in their views. It was clear that their confidence level grew tremendously. This was most likely due to the level of responsibility and leadership shown by the students during the panel discussions and also the way the general school community embraced their efforts. The Grade 8 students who were involved in the project clearly expressed that the experience was positive and memorable.

Following are excerpts of student interview data:

- It was a good experience. We communicated to each other. We talked about issues that we don't really talk about in our regular conversations.
- It helps you come to an agreement or to agree to disagree ... or maybe to make people more open-minded about situations. How you would normally think about it, you would probably say, oh yeah, this is right.
- There were some things that would come up, and it would just astonish me how people would think that way, and it would give me a new perspective of thinking as well.
- Especially with everybody watching you and you talking, it gave you confidence. It sort of helped me be more opinionated, more like I can speak my mind in a way.
When I asked students how they came up with the topics, one said the topics came from “thinking about the different things that are happening in our society, going over them, and thinking about how it affects me personally and my peers as well.” Another student said, “Writing the questions and thinking of them also made me think of other things... about bullying and violence.”

One student who had the role of moderator reported on the group effort: “I think it was a group effort as well. Like for me to direct the questions, people would have to answer them and that would lead to another question. So I think it was all of us who were able to succeed in that.”

One student who is now in high school reflected on her experience of being a moderator for the panel discussion on community violence: “Being moderator, which I was, since I was directing the questions, now since I’m a freshman in high school it makes me feel more confident about going up to people and asking them questions. I feel more that I’m my own person and I’m more confident personally.”

The most significant challenge was the effort involved in sustaining this project. It was difficult to carry out the planned series of panel discussion topics because of the limited time available. The panel discussions could cover only some of the curriculum expectations. Other subject areas had to be covered and report cards had to be completed. So time was a premium. I remember the students kept asking, “Miss, when can we do another topic?”

Another challenge was that students planned on having members of their community attend the panel discussion. However, the event was held during the day, and so few parents could be involved because of their employment or household responsibilities.

Some students in the class found the discussion of sensitive issues very difficult. This meant that I needed to become aware of the many sides of an issue and support students through the process of discussing sensitive and controversial issues.

The number of activities in which most of the Grade 8s were involved also added some pressure. A large number of the students were involved in a variety of extracurricular activities, which at times involved being away from school for tournaments or musical events: these activities further built their leadership skills, and these could not be compromised.

**REFLECTION**

Despite the challenges of the project, the impact on the students was tremendous. A sense of accomplishment and pride was noticeable in the students as they reflected on the process both in writing and in oral communication. I observed that students demonstrated knowledge acquisition, the ability to take on multiple perspectives, and the ability to examine the complexities of issues. Overall, I observed increased student engagement with ideas and a marked improvement both in student participation in classroom discussions and in their written work. More than that, however, there was a feeling of empowerment and ownership.
I encourage teachers to try a form of Speak Out in their intermediate classrooms. What better way is there to discover the kinds of issues and ideas that students of this age grapple with in their daily lives? What better way is there to design the kind of curriculum in which students see themselves reflected and see their ideas valued and their voices heard?

REFERENCES


ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Sincere thanks to the following people who supported me during the planning and implementation of my Inclusive Schools project: my Grade 8 students who were willing to take on any challenges thrown at them; the administrators at Carleton Village, Curtis Ennis and Gary Pieters who were very receptive and gave me all the support needed; and my Grade 7/8 team partners, especially Thelma Akyea who gave me constructive feedback. Special thanks also to Beverly Caswell who always found the time to give positive comments and commendations. Without your support the project would not have been successful.

BIO

Uda Hutchinson-Mckenzie taught Grades 7 and 8 at Carleton Village Public School for nine years. Currently, she is a teacher at Elia Middle School.

Beverly Caswell is the director of the Robertson Program for Inquiry-based Teaching in Mathematics and Science at the Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study, OISE, University of Toronto. An associate member of OISE’s Centre for Urban Schooling and a founding coordinator of OISE’s Inner City Option, Bev was teacher liaison for the Inclusive Schools project at Carleton Village Public School.
In the popular children’s book series *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, the reader goes on a journey with the main character as he repeatedly tries and fails to make sense of the changing world around him. Not only can my students relate to his successes and failures, so can I. You see, as a teacher I too try and fail at new ideas all the time as I attempt to find better ways to reach my students. My journey with the Inclusive Schools project has presented a lot of challenges, changes, and brought much joy to my teaching. This is my diary, the diary of a teacher learning to transform her thinking and practice, and deepening her understanding of good pedagogy.

When the Inclusive Schools project came to Carleton Village Public School three years ago, I thought I already had teaching figured out. I had this idea that I could change the world with my own teaching style and that I didn’t need or want to change anything I was doing. As a “newish” teacher (five years’ teaching experience) I was under the impression that by including a few culturally diverse texts and discussing a variety of culturally significant holidays I was demonstrating equity and inclusive practices in my teaching. To put it bluntly, I was naive and afraid that changing my ways meant the job I was doing wasn’t good enough.

Our school was very fortunate to have the Inclusive Schools project support our Teaching-Learning Critical Pathway (TLCP) program. This form of professional development involved the school’s equity team (Cynthia Arcato, Thelma Akyea, Andrea Tufts), teachers, and principal (Curtis Ennis), an equity instructional leader from the Toronto District School Board (David Ast), and the university liaison for the project (Bev Caswell). It also featured collaborative planning and exploring issues of social justice through curriculum areas using the James Banks approaches to multicultural education (1988, 1993, 2008). (See Figure 1 and Appendix, pp. 184–185.)
Each professional development session unlocked something different for me. I was slowly starting to realize that I could incorporate a more inclusive approach into my teaching and not have to drop everything I was doing (which was my biggest fear). For example, in my Grade 2 unit on families, I kept the same basic structure of talking about student families, but this time I asked my students to explore different family structures, and we discussed the diversity in families using texts that included LGBTQ parents, adoptive families, and multigenerational families (see Figure 2).

I think many teachers fear starting from scratch. But through this process and through the introduction of the James Banks continuum of lesson planning, I realized that I could use the curriculum as a foundation to teach different perspectives. Not only did this continuum give me a sense of where my teaching was in terms of engaging my students, but also it gave me a framework for how to improve my planning. It became clear to me that most of my teaching had consisted of what Banks referred to as an “additive approach,” and my students were merely passive learners as I made all the choices of what we would discuss and how we would use the information.

Through various collaborative planning activities within the professional learning community that had been created via the Inclusive Schools pilot project and our TLCP, my teaching partners and I discovered that we didn’t need to start from scratch. Many of our practices were useful, but I realized that implementing small changes that allowed the students to have a say in the direction of their learning and building on the knowledge and experiences they brought would help me design an inclusive learning environment that could help me improve student learning and academic achievement. I took the idea of inquiry, knowledge building, and student voice into my classroom and changed the way I was about to embark on a storytelling unit.
This storytelling unit was one that I had developed the year before, and although many students demonstrated success, I had a handful of students who seemed to have difficulty connecting with the texts within the unit. Now empowered by my new learning, I changed the core of the unit. The first time I taught this unit, I chose the stories the students were going to tell, and I chose exclusively traditional European literature: for example, Three Little Pigs. My rationale at the time was that these stories were probably familiar to the students and therefore easier to understand and connect with. This time I consulted with our school librarian who, through the Inclusive Schools initiative, had recently restocked the library with books that would better represent the students we teach. We gathered a variety of folktale anthologies from around the world, and soon I had a well-rounded collection. I allowed my students to read them all and then select their own stories. This was one way I moved along the James Banks continuum toward the third stage of transforming the curriculum: changing the structure of the curriculum to help students view concepts, issues, events, and themes from the perspectives of various cultural and faith groups. And I was able to accomplish this by changing these two elements of my unit.

The perspectives of the storytellers changed the direction and depth of the learning. This time students’ questions led to conversations of world geography and different cultural histories. In observing the students’ participation and engagement in this unit, I could see that the students’ buy-in and attention was measurably greater than it was other years during the storytelling unit. For instance, students’ time-on-task improved. There was less off-topic chatting; instead, conversations were centred on good storytelling strategies, and students were actively practising telling stories to each other. In our newly developed community of learners, the priority was the ability to tell a
fabulous story, and students were in control of the direction of their own learning, and they were pushing each other to succeed. Students offered each other constructive feedback such as, “That was good but you need to pause and breathe,” or “Joe, you need to make that part more exciting, maybe move your hands like this.” Students took this feedback and implemented the changes to their stories.

The greatest success of all came from one student who experiences focus and attention difficulties and also a stutter. During this storytelling unit, while he was telling his chosen folktale from the Republic of Congo, he did not stutter once. His attention and focus improved, as did his self-confidence. Then there was another student, who in kindergarten and Grade 1 rarely spoke at school; in her time with me she slowly began to speak in the classroom. When she told her story, she displayed confidence and improved fluency.

To demonstrate our work I had an idea to videotape the students individually while they told their story. I was worried that the rest of my Grade 2s and 3s would not be able to manage the quiet I needed to get the audio clear enough. My students rose to the occasion, and in a wonderful demonstration of understanding when the first student had completed telling his story without a single stutter, the rest of the class broke into a wonderful round of applause and praise for his effort. His face beamed as did mine. In that moment, I wondered why I had never before questioned the fact that I was the one who made all the decisions in the classroom. I thought that since I was teaching primary children I needed to make those decisions. However, when students were given the opportunity to contribute to some of the decisions related to curriculum content and were given choice about which stories they connected with, I saw vast improvements in their ability to communicate orally and in their general reading comprehension. I realized that I would no longer teach at my students but rather I would teach with them, learning alongside them. That round of applause from the rest of the class was the best descriptive feedback the student had ever received. His peers had acknowledged his challenges, successes, risks, and rewards without saying a word. It was a powerful moment and one that I will always remember.

**LEARNING ABOUT ABLEISM**

Fast-forward six months to a TLCP in which our Inclusive Schools team introduced the idea of addressing the issue of ableism through different units of study. Thinking about the community of learners that made up my classroom that year, my teaching partner and I developed a unit that focused on invisible disabilities; these included stuttering, attention deficit disorders, autism, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and a range of other learning disabilities that affected some students in my class. After four weeks of sharing a variety of read-aloud texts with my students and working through each text to improve reading strategies and stimulate classroom discussions, I noticed that the relationships among my students were improving. Students who may have previously had conflicts with one another were beginning to come to a new understanding of why each student behaves in certain ways.

The greatest learning for me came from a conversation that I had with my students after they had seen me in a poster campaign in the school created by another teacher. (See Figure 3 and Erica Cameron’s article, pp. 63–71.) Being dyslexic is a part of who I am as a person, learner, and
Yet it is something that I had never shared with my students. This project has caused me to reflect on why I have never shared this information with my students. I have spent a lot of time wondering about it. I had often shared this part of myself with parents during parent-teacher conferences and had shared it casually with most of my colleagues, but never with the children I teach. What happened next taught me a valuable lesson: if you share more of who you are in your teaching the possibility of making greater connections with students increases. That is just what happened on a particular day in May.

Figure 3. Teacher Melinda Da Rocha’s “Carleton Apparel” awareness-raising campaign poster

During a classroom discussion, a student who had seen my poster in the hallway of the school asked me what I had. I explained that as a child I had a hard time learning to read, because I saw words and letters backwards and had a hard time with sounds and spelling. I explained to my class how my parents and teachers helped me find strategies that worked for me to improve in all areas. I then answered all their questions and left the conversation feeling like I had done a wonderful thing sharing this part of me with them.

As my class moved on to our next activity I noticed that one particular student looked very sad: a student I never felt able to reach no matter what my approach. He often exhibited explosive behaviour, rarely attended to classroom learning, and always seemed to be dealing with much more than I could ever know. I asked him to come speak to me away from the rest of the children. When I asked him what was wrong, he looked up at me with tears in his eyes and said, “I think I have what you have.” As he began to sob, I comforted him and told him that we would work hard to find the strategies that would work best for him. He had often referred to himself as a bad kid, and I understood that at this moment he was realizing that he wasn’t a troublemaker. I hoped that he might just be letting go of that self-image and coming to realize that there was a reason for his actions and behaviour—he was the way he was and we could help. We made a pact to work together. This moment was a life-changer for me, and when I shared the story with colleagues during our school’s next TLCP, I cried. I was grateful for the opportunity to share this story and felt a sense of trust in the room along with the understanding that the work we were doing was transforming all of us.
So as I reflect on Inclusive Schools project and what it has meant for my students and me, the word transformation comes to mind. Transformation is defined as making a thorough or dramatic change. I transformed the way I plan and deliver my program, shifting the decision-making from my hands and putting it in the hands of my students. I have transformed how I view our differences as people and learners. These differences serve as our strengths, and I now try to consider many different perspectives as I plan and implement lessons: starting always with my students and who they are. Importantly, I have transformed how I share who I am with my students. I have grown and learned that being willing to change my thinking and trying something new is the missing piece in the puzzle of effective teaching. Whenever I think of that moment with the student who saw that he too was dyslexic, it brings tears to my eyes. The process of building an inclusive curriculum with students is an emotional one, and its transformative power is healing.

REFERENCES


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I feel fortunate to have had the support of the Inclusive Schools project, the school’s equity team members (Thelma Akyea, Cynthia Arcato, and Andrea Tufts), a wonderful and supportive team-teaching experience (Linda Penate-Custodio, Denyse Stewart, Mary Carere) and principal (Curtis Ennis), the equity instructional leader from the Toronto District School Board (David Ast), and the university liaison for the project (Bev Caswell).

BIO

Melinda (Mimi) Da Rocha has taught for ten years at Carleton Village Public School, where she also attended school from Grade 1 to Grade 8. She taught Grade 1 for five years, and then Grade 3/4, Grade 3, Grade 2/3 class, Grade 5/6, and, currently she is teaching Grade 3.

Beverly Caswell is the director of the Robertson Program for Inquiry-based Teaching in Mathematics and Science at the Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study, OISE, University of Toronto. An associate member of OISE’s Centre for Urban Schooling and a founding coordinator of OISE’s Inner City Option, Bev was teacher liaison for the Inclusive Schools project at Carleton Village Public School.
As classrooms across the country become increasingly diverse, the greatest challenge for teachers may be determining how to connect in significant ways across multiple lines of difference. Teachers must meet this challenge and find ways to forge meaningful relationships with students who come from different cultures and have different experiences and, at the same time, help these students develop academic skills and skills to become critical citizens in a multicultural democracy (Morrell & Andrade-Duncan, 2002). As a white, male, teacher in an urban school it was important for me to get to know my students and their interests and to use this knowledge in my pedagogy.

The students in my Grade 3 and 4 language arts class did not appear interested in the material I was teaching. They were disengaged from the teaching and learning process, and I was interested in increasing their engagement. Instead of blaming the students, I decided to examine my pedagogy and make some changes that were culturally responsive and relevant (Gay, 2000). This prompted me to find new ways to connect with the students and grab their interest in literacy. I examined ways to increase their engagement and achievement by using what I call “effective instructional approach” to raise their level of critical thinking and understanding of concepts. My class, like the rest of the school, consisted of a large number of African Canadian students. They told me they enjoyed rap music, and I decided to use this topic to bring literacy alive because it was interesting and relevant to them.
The average age of students in the class was eight- to nine-years old. There were eleven students: seven boys and four girls. I wanted to make learning fun, interesting to them, and relevant to their own cultures by giving them a voice. At the same time I needed to meet the necessary curriculum, data, and evaluative requirements. I was particularly interested in finding out what would be the impact on students’ literacy skills by using music they related to. According to Morrell (2002), as classrooms become increasingly diverse, educators struggle to find curricula and pedagogical strategies that are inclusive and affirmative, yet facilitate the development of academic and critical literacies. The key question that guided this project was: How could rap music be used in the language arts curriculum to impact student engagement and motivation in literacy?

According to Obiozor (2010), the popularity and fascination of hip-hop culture among youth includes not only the music but also the influences on youth speech and attire. This genre can be used as an instructional strategy to highlight behaviour, encourage active participation in the classroom, and increase attendance. Obiozor stresses the need for educators to use a variety of culturally responsive teaching techniques to engage a diverse population of exceptional students in active learning that promotes self-advocacy and educational performance. Weinstein (2006) suggests that the use of rap music helps students with (a) discourse membership, (b) self-expression and self-representation, and (c) play. She challenges educators to construct an educational environment in which the kind of engagement with learning that occurs among young rappers can develop. Her focus on rap music highlights how young people respond to activities in which they can actively involve themselves, their cultures, their families, and communities. In this case, rap encapsulates all of these because it has a strong personal connection with youth. So rap is an effective medium to consider for educational use in the classroom.

**PROCESS**

I began by researching rap music to better familiarize myself with this genre. Then, before giving any instruction in class, I collected data to determine the baseline reading level of my students. I gave each student a reading attitude survey to learn how they felt about reading. Then I gave the class a KWL chart—What I Know, What I Want to Know, and What I Learned—to find out what they already knew about rap music. (See Figure 1.) They completed the first two columns before we began the activities and the last column after the activities were completed.
I asked the class the following question: Would you prefer to read a poem just by reading the text or to sing the same poem to hip-hop instrumental music? Explain your choice.

I introduced a language arts unit by using a series of nursery rhymes and curriculum-based raps that I had created (see Figure 2). To create a rap song I used words from the Dolch list for Grade 1. The Dolch word list consists of "service words" (pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, and verbs) that cannot be learned through the use of pictures. (See Figure 3.) I gave each student a rap song to read. As they read the rap, I recorded them using the program Audacity® and a digital microphone.

After looking at the students’ responses on the KWL charts over the course of three weeks I engaged the students in various activities. After each student had been recorded reading the rap for the first time, I encouraged them to practise reading at home, and I gave each student their own copy of the nursery rhyme, a “practice-reading log,” and a timer so they could record the amount of time they spent practising at home (see Figure 4). I checked their work regularly to see that they filled in their practice-reading logs. I modelled the nursery rhymes for the students, and we read them together as a class. I placed the rhymes on the SmartBoard®, and they took turns reading out loud. They enjoyed using the technology.

I used the reading attitude survey to determine their level of confidence in reading. Students had their own copy of the survey, and I projected the survey on the SmartBoard®. In this way I could guide them through the process, supporting their reading and their interpretation of the questions when needed. The results of the survey were kept confidential to maintain the students’ trust.

**Figure 1. The rap music KWL chart**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What I Know</th>
<th>What I Want to Know</th>
<th>What I Learned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1) Who is your favourite rap artist? Explain your answer.

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

2) What do you like about rap music? Give details.

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
Figure 2. Rap by Paul Bosotas

Urban Communities
Rural and urban communities, they both have MANY similarities
You see, they both have people, trees and streets
They both have places where everyone eats

Let’s talk about URBAN communities
Let’s focus on ONE so we can see

How the two are DIFFERENT and not the same
Let’s focus on the differences and play this game

An urban place has subways, and skyscrapers and many roads
An urban place has subways, and skyscrapers, and many roads

An urban place has sewers, and streetcars, and many roads
An urban place has sewers, and streetcars, and many roads

Let’s talk about URBAN communities
And how they have MORE of certain things

You see they have more people, cars and roads
They have a lot of buildings and candy stores

You see they have more houses, trucks and malls
They have a lot big department stores

So if you’re ever in an URBAN community
You will see a lot MORE of certain things

Rural Communities
Rural and urban communities, they both have many similarities
You see, they both have people, trees and streets
They both have places where everyone eats

Let’s talk about RURAL communities
Let’s focus on ONE so we can see

How the two are DIFFERENT and not the same
Let’s focus on the differences and play this game

A rural place has tractors, and farms and open fields
A rural place has tractors, and farms and open fields

A rural place has cows, and crops, and open fields
A rural place has cows, and crops, and open fields

Let’s talk about RURAL communities
And how they have LESS of certain things

You see they have less people, cars and roads
They have fewer buildings and candy stores

You see they have fewer stores, cars and malls
They don’t have a lot of big department stores

So if you’re ever in a rural community
You will see a lot LESS of certain things
**Figure 3. Fun with words: Dolch list rap**

One, two, three and fouring.
We have to learn some words so it won’t be boring.

Could you let us all take a walk
And down the street over to the dock

Could you fly by over and back again
Thank every single day I play with my friends

Ask every child just to talk
And thank the world so it won’t bark

Just think about when you were my age
Did you ask him how to live when it rained

Have you ever put a round stone in your shoe
Then jumped up and down until your foot turned blue

Stop right there because you know I’m just kidding
Don’t listen to the words I may be giving

After all I will not give him any
Of my hard work from my jar of pennies

But once his old heart will open up
A light will come in and he will strut

So tell her how an eagle can fly
Tell her that it soars before she cries

Has anyone told them as they were free
That they could learn the Dolch list and sing with glee

So those are all the words that I need to say

**Figure 4. Practice-reading log**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Minutes Practised</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>_______ minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>_______ minutes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How did you feel about practising this text all week? (Check One)

- 😊
- 🙁
- 😞

Explain your choice.

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
After the students read the nursery rhymes for a week, I asked them to fill out a survey about how they felt about reading (see Figure 5). I then modelled the same nursery rhymes to the beat of the hip-hop instrumental track. When I had finished, I invited the students to stand up in front of the class and read or rap the nursery rhymes to the hip-hop music. I provided each student with a CD recording of the instrumental track, along with two other hip-hop instrumental tracks that they could practise at home. The purpose of the practice was to make the students feel comfortable to read in front of the class, and also to include their parents in the activity. I encouraged them to complete their practice-reading log so I could see how much time they were practising. After they performed in front of the class I asked them how they felt. I also recorded the students. They were very excited to hear themselves on tape. To get their feedback, I asked the students how they felt reading the nursery rhyme to rap (see Figure 6).

**Figure 5. Nursery rhyme reading survey**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name: _______________________________</th>
<th>Date: ________________</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>How did you feel about practising this text all week?</strong> (Check One)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>🎈</td>
<td>😞</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explain your choice.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>________________________________</td>
<td>____________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>________________________________</td>
<td>____________________________</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 6. Student preference survey**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name: _______________________________</th>
<th>Date: ________________</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Would you prefer to read a poem just by reading the text or to rap the same poem to hip-hop instrumental music?</strong> (Circle One)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>![Reading]</td>
<td>![Rapping]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explain your choice.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>________________________________</td>
<td>____________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>________________________________</td>
<td>____________________________</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
My assessments were based on (a) how the children felt during the tasks they were given, (b) what they already knew, (c) what their interests were, and (d) how motivated they were to practise reading the nursery rhymes at home—both with and without rapping or music.

I made written, recorded, and oral assessments that were formative and ongoing in nature. For one of the student assessments I created the Fun with Words rap, using all the words in the Grade 1 Dolch list. I was required by my Methods and Resource Teacher (MART) to administer this assessment.¹ I used this rap instead of asking the students to read the list of words off the page in isolation of context or a sentence of any nature.

LEARNING

As this project unfolded, I collected evidence of learning through student assessments, observations, and my own reflections. I noticed a marked improvement in participation, particularly for emerging readers and English language learners. While some improved more than others, there was a definite increase in fluency in all of my students. Many students demonstrated an increased fluency by completing the reading one minute faster than they did during their initial recorded reading. The project made me realize that the assessments we often ask our students to do are sometimes extremely limiting, and do not unleash their true potential. The two most significant areas of improvement I observed were student participation and increased fluency in reading.

Participation of students

Initially, the students were reluctant to read the nursery rhymes they were given to read in language arts class, and they showed very little interest in reading. While not all the students embraced rap and some were reluctant to perform, overall, the students became more engaged in reading, enjoyed listening to each other, and liked using the SmartBoard® to sing along when others were singing. At first, some were not too keen on practising their reading, and only a few students put up their hands and volunteered to read in class. After the rap was introduced their participation and interest increased. This approach sparked great pleasure in almost all of the students. Using rap music was an incredible motivator for some, but not others. Most of the class was really excited about doing the raps to the nursery rhymes, but some of the more shy students found it intimidating to rap in front of their peers. But for some, that didn’t last long. The students enjoyed being recorded while reading and rapping. However, one boy in the class never presented his rap to the class; instead he became the “selectah,”² the music selector or digital DJ in the class. His role was to play the music for the rest of the class, and reload the song each time a new student came up to try to rap in front of the SmartBoard®. Students liked the activity and hearing their own voices. This was not a typical classroom activity. Hearing their recorded voices was both a moment of excitement and embarrassment for the students. Many of them had never been recorded or heard what they sounded like.

¹ In the Toronto District School Board a MART teacher is a designated staff member who receives regular and ongoing professional development to enhance special education expertise and resources for a school.
² Jamaican patois for selector.
Increased fluency in reading

I did not measure their reading fluency numerically, but through working with students one-to-one, I noticed that their reading fluency improved. This could be due to their practise at home or to the use of rap. The students exuded more confidence, and some parents commented that their children enjoyed reading at home and using the recorders to practise what they were sent home with. The students enjoyed getting their own CD with their homework on it. Their parents were also very pleased that their child was able to do their homework in a manner that was fun. The students treated the CDs well. One parent said, “My son listened to the song more than 30 times one night.” I also realized that some of the students were very talented at rapping. One girl whose reading fluency was below grade level created an outstanding piece completely on her own; it flowed and showed excellent rhythmic verbalizing of lyrics. Hearing her sing the lyrics in her own way was incredible. She also memorized the entire song and sang it with fluency and rhythm.

Some of the challenges in carrying out the project involved the time to plan and execute alternative lessons that connected with the curriculum expectations. It also took time to create various alternative assessment tools. In the beginning I had to teach the students how to work together. I also had to learn to be comfortable with their pace of learning, and work with the students one-to-one. Some of the students with more challenging educational needs found it difficult at first and had to be given more support. This genre of music was difficult at first for a few students with special needs; however, eventually they became motivated to sing.

**REFLECTION**

This project can inform other teachers on how to use rap music, or other forms of music their students are familiar with, to improve students’ reading, literacy skills, and engagement. This project showed that students in inner-city schools need curriculum that is culturally relevant and engaging to bring out their capabilities. The students thought that using the rap was more fun than reading the nursery rhymes over and over again. The use of rap seemed to motivate the students who would sing and dance in class; it focused their attention on the lesson and reduced classroom management issues that would normally arise. The students from different backgrounds bonded with each other in class. This was particularly noticeable among the students of Somalian and Jamaican heritage. The students also began to express themselves more confidently. This activity points to the importance of culturally relevant and responsive teaching for engaging students. This project encouraged even the shy readers to practise reading more.

The project has implications for curriculum areas other than English and language arts, and also for ways to infuse music more broadly into teaching and learning. For example, curriculum content based on raps might align with the specific course expectations of the Urban and Rural Communities unit in the Ontario curriculum on social studies. It is important for teachers to provide curriculum that inspires students to acquire the skills they need to succeed in their environment. The project showed, for example, that teachers who are not from a particular community can “border-cross”; that is, they
can learn to understand the contemporary culture of their students. In many classrooms in Ontario the teachers are primarily of different backgrounds than the students. When teachers include the experiences and prior knowledge of the students in their lesson-planning and pedagogical strategies, this will increase student engagement and achievement.

REFERENCES


ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the students of Flemington Public School for allowing me the privilege of being their teacher and of engaging in this most rewarding project.

BIO

Paul Bosotas has been a teacher with the TDSB for five years. He specializes in special education, and he has a keen interest in physical education. His goal as an educator is for children to feel safe and confident with themselves as learners and as people.

Ann Lopez, a faculty member in the Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education at OISE, University of Toronto, is currently the acting academic director of the Initial Teacher Education program. She has a doctorate in Curriculum Studies from the University of Toronto, and she teaches courses in educational administration and leadership.
Beverly Caswell and Andrea Tufts

As part of our school improvement plan at Carleton Village, and to strengthen our inclusive curriculum and increase student engagement, members of the school’s newly formed Equity and Inclusive Schools Committee discussed ways to shift our current practices toward the development of culturally relevant teaching and learning strategies. Our school was underperforming on provincial standardized tests, and we noticed that students seemed disengaged with curriculum.

With members of the equity team (Cynthia Arcato, Thelma Akyea, and Andrea Tufts), along with Principal Curtis Ennis and instructional leaders David Ast and Mark Sprack we examined teacher development research related to culturally relevant pedagogy and issues of equity in education. This research shows promising ways to reach students who have traditionally been underserved by the educational system (Banks, 1995; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Delpit, 1988; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

The school principal wanted the new initiatives to be viewed by both teachers and students as a lens through which an inclusive curriculum could be developed, and not simply as add-ons to teacher’s responsibilities. It was our hope that the infusion of these types of strategies would have positive implications for students and teachers in our school.
We worked collaboratively with the school’s equity team, the school’s principal and vice principal, instructional leaders from the school board, and the project liaison from OISE to design our initial professional development workshops. The aim of our team was to inspire and support teachers in developing an equity and social justice approach to curriculum design. To create school-wide “buy-in” to a social justice focus for teachers, we combined the goals of the Inclusive Schools project with initiatives already in place in the school—such as the Teaching-Learning Critical Pathways (TLCP) program that focused on improving students’ persuasive writing skills. Funding for the Inclusive Schools project provided teachers with in-school release time to ensure participation of all staff and to coordinate with TDSB personnel.

**PROCESS**

We were particularly interested in how to create ways for teachers to collaboratively design and implement inclusive curriculum and to create learning environments that meaningfully engage our students in issues of social justice. How could we create ways to move our school forward with both teachers and students working positively together?

We wanted to create a plan to learn about the issues that interested the students or affected their lives. We implemented a professional development project according to the three stages described below.

**Creating professional development opportunities**

We invited teachers to participate in after-school professional development (PD) workshops (with dinner provided) to stimulate teacher inquiry and critical reflection. This work built on an existing professional development program with David Ast around cultural proficiency (Lindsey et al., 2008). A central tenet of cultural proficiency is to recognize the importance of keeping strategies that facilitate culturally proficient actions and changing those that block such actions.

The first PD session (led by Ast) involved examining our personal assumptions, then examining school policies and practices that might either block or facilitate cultural proficiency (see Figure 1). We focused on curriculum reform using the James Banks approaches to multicultural education. (See Appendix, pp. 184–185.) Drawing on a number of TDSB equity resources, teachers began to examine how race, ethnicity, and culture shaped the learning experiences of many students. We quickly found that it was one thing to discuss and strategize with teachers within a professional learning environment but another thing to enact these practices into the day-to-day life of our classrooms and school.

We were particularly interested in how students would respond when given the opportunity in class to explore social justice issues using an inquiry-based approach. Would student buy-in increase teacher buy-in? It was our hope that if teachers saw their students become engaged in learning about social justice issues, they would be inspired to develop a student-driven curriculum with a social justice focus.
To inspire and support teachers in developing an equity and social justice lens through curriculum design, we decided to undertake a school-wide initiative using the fair or unfair scenarios as a way to provide teachers with a firsthand opportunity to see how equity-focused, inclusive teaching practices might lead to higher levels of interest and engagement in students. In collaboration with members of the school’s equity team we developed a consciousness-raising activity that was presented in each of the Grade 1 to Grade 8 classrooms.

We visited each classroom from Grade 1 to Grade 8 bringing the fair or unfair scenarios to introduce social justice issues, to stimulate class discussion, and to reveal the kinds of social justice issues that interest students. We introduced the scenarios to students on March 6, 2009, which happened to be Toronto’s 175th anniversary. We began by asking students if they knew whose birthday it was that day, and then shared that Toronto was 175-years old. We asked students what they liked about Toronto, and then how they might improve the city.

We then introduced a very basic consciousness-raising activity that took about 15 minutes per classroom. We developed statements that reflected particular social justice issues, such as homelessness, access to clean drinking water, poverty, children’s rights, the right to play, child soldiers, child labour, racism, and environmental issues (see Figure 2). Each statement was written on a separate placard, which we read aloud to the class. Then we asked students, “Is this fair or unfair?” As we read each statement, we asked students to close their eyes and raise a hand if they thought the statement was (a) fair or (b) unfair. We then tallied results. Students across the grades offered reasons for their choices and seemed ready to engage in debating about what made a statement fair or unfair.
Figure 2. Fair or unfair? Social justice scenario prompts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prompt</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Toronto has 4,181 shelter beds for people who are homeless.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All children have a right to play.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About 218 million children are engaged in some form of labour around the world.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If an adult in the family becomes ill and can’t work, children should go out and work and earn money for the family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Around 120 million children in developing countries are not in primary school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A person has to be 18 years of age to be a soldier.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What if residents of Toronto didn’t have access to clean drinking water?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 250,000 children are used as child soldiers. (Prompt: to try to understand that number, we encouraged children to think about how many schools full of children that would be)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All children have to go to school until they are 18 years old.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clean drinking water should be a human right.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our school elevator doesn’t go to the third floor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All students will be wearing school uniforms by September.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During this activity, classroom teachers noticed that their students’ ability to engage with ideas was impressive. Students showed interest in different issues and drew on personal connections to contribute their ideas around each social issue. The fair-unfair pedagogic activity provided a space for students to direct classroom learning and to consider, explore, and debate issues of social justice. Each classroom voted to identify one issue that would become the focus of their study over a number of weeks.

The school principal continued to provide opportunities for further professional development for Carleton Village teachers, drawing on the expertise of David Ast and the school’s equity team. Figure 3 shows teachers and the principal collaborating during a PD session that focused on viewing curriculum through a social justice lens. Figure 4 shows teacher Daniel Yamasaki examining the many resources provided to support teachers in their curriculum planning.

Figure 3. Teachers collaboratively plan inclusive curriculum with a social justice focus.
Following are some of the areas of study that were taken up in different classrooms:

- Grade 1 classes collaborated to examine the meaning of having a place to call home and the issue of not having a place to call home (homelessness). As a culminating activity, the Grade 1s created clay bowls for the Empty Bowls program, a fundraiser for the local food bank in their area.
- Grade 4 students used geometry skills to design shelters for refugee camps and justified their choices through writing.
- Grade 6 students studied stereotypes and racism from personal experiences or examples they had encountered. The unit progressed from the personal to the implications of racism in society. Students created a video and produced many samples of writing that illustrated their developing understanding of stereotypes and racism.
- Grade 8 students studied children’s rights and created poetry, spoken word, and other text forms to demonstrate their learning. They also participated in debates on topics surrounding children’s rights.

Following the first six weeks of the classroom projects, teachers met in division teams to highlight student work and to discuss the process of teaching with themes of social justice. Teachers reported an excitement about teaching and about increased student engagement. They observed how students who didn’t usually contribute were now contributing to class discussions and writing text that they wanted to share with peers, and that students’ persuasive writing had shown improvement. Teachers also talked about feeling supported in developing different ways of assessing their students.

This led to the idea of creating resources or literacy kits to support teachers as they worked to support students’ interests in these areas.
Development of literacy kits

From the fair-unfair activity emerged the idea to develop literacy kits that infuse equity and inclusion into the curriculum. This was a key initiative launched through the Inclusive Schools project. These kits were specifically designed by teachers at Carleton Village to meet the interests, learning profiles, and readiness of our students. The idea of literacy kits brings together the goals of the three different initiatives of the school: the Inclusive Schools project, the Equity Inclusion Statement, and the Ontario Ministry’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy. The aim of the literacy kits was to ensure that teachers had access to resources that could support these goals and at the same time create teacher friendly, practical tools. The school librarian played a key role by purchasing and making accessible student resources that reflected their realities, allowed them to address issues in their own lives, and might lead them to take action at local and global levels.

Topics for the kits were derived by examining school and community demographics and TDSB and Ministry of Education data, such as gender as well as literacy and numeracy scores. We also examined the human resources we had access to—interested students, parent volunteers, and available resource people within classrooms and the library. We discussed past successes at our school and the fact that students and their teachers were most engaged when the curriculum was linked in culturally relevant and socially just practices. Teachers and administrators, along with our OISE partners, worked to gather resources and create their initial lessons for the kits, which were based on the divisional themes of storytelling (primary), children’s rights and the importance of names (junior), and conflict and change (intermediate). The literacy kit resource list can be found in Figure 5.

Kits were developed based on a critical reflection of our teaching practices gained through ongoing professional learning on equity and inclusive curriculum and from a review of resources such as those listed in Figure 5. Each kit contained overviews, lesson plans, student exemplars, and print or online resources. We wanted the kits to be assessed and revised regularly to ensure that they continue to meet the needs of our community. The school’s equity team gave workshops on the contents of the kits and their link to our school’s overall school improvement plan. Through enormous support from the school’s administration team, particularly the school principal, we conducted consultation and feedback sessions to ensure our colleagues understood the kits and had opportunities for practice. Teachers worked on linking the teaching and learning strategies in the kits to the James Banks continuum of curriculum reform (see Appendix, pp.184–185). We then incorporated into the kits the ideas and suggestions the teachers provided at those workshops. Teachers also tested the kits within their classrooms and met in grade-level groups to revise and refine the materials based on students’ responses.
Literacy Kit Resource List:
Empowering All Within Your Community

Storytelling

*Aziz the Storyteller*
By Vi Hughes
ISBN 1 896580 45 9

*The Story Blanket*
By Ferida Wolff and Harriet May Savitz
ISBN 978 1 8427 0756 2

*Stories on the Move*
By Arlene Cohen
ISBN 978 1 5915 8418 6

*Handmade Tales: Stories to Make and Take*
By Dianne de Las Casas
ISBN 978 1 5915 8536 7

*Children Tell Stories: Teaching and Using Storytelling in the Classroom*
By Martha Hamilton and Mitch Weiss
ISBN 1 57274 663 7

Children’s rights and the importance of names

*Every Human Has Rights: A Photographic Declaration for Kids*
Foreword by Mary Robinson, Former United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
ISBN 978 4263 0510 8

*Naming Ceremonies, Rites of Passage*  
By Mandy Ross
ISBN 978 1 4034 4597 1

*Three Names of Me*
By Mary Cummings
ISBN 978 0 8075 7903 9

*The Name Jar*
By Yangsook Choi
ISBN 978 0 4404 1799 6

Conflict and change

*Why War is Never a Good Idea*
By Alice Walker
ISBN 978 0 0607 5385 6

*One*
By Kathryn Otoshi
ISBN 978 0 9723 9464 2
Kits were officially distributed during the school visit of the Silver Birch Nominee Janet Wilson, author of *One Peace: True Stories of Young Activists*. We wanted to inspire students “to be the change they wish to see in the world, to create a culture of peace not only on days of remembrance but throughout the year” (quote from author’s press release).

**Figure 6. Andrea Tufts displaying literacy kits at workshop for Carleton Village teachers**

**LEARNING**

Drawing on the Centre for Urban Schooling framework for culturally relevant and responsive teaching (Kugler & West-Burns, 2010), we developed our understanding of inclusiveness as a tool of analysis, reflection, and action. We focused on classroom climate and instruction, student voice, community connections, and the importance of creating a culture of teacher professional development.

Data were collected through teacher reflections, anecdotal observations, and student work. Our key findings relate to both students and teachers.

The fair-unfair scenarios were a powerful tool for engaging students and teachers with ideas of social justice. Later in the school year we created fair-unfair scenarios to launch a school-wide study of ableism for our TLCP. (See Figure 7.)

Social justice issues were a powerful means to engage students of all ages. Classroom teachers were surprised by the interest and engagement this process generated in their students. They noticed that some students spoke who had never participated in a class discussion before. Students of all ages were willing and capable of providing reasons or justifications for their ideas.

Young students seemed ready to engage in debate about what made a statement fair or unfair. For instance, in a Grade 2 classroom many students raised their hands and voted that it was fair that there were 4,181 beds for homeless people in Toronto because that was a very large number. Then one student raised his hand and asked, “But what if there were 4,182 people in Toronto who were homeless? Then there wouldn’t be enough beds, and that *wouldn’t* be fair.” This initial activity showed us that children are very ready to engage with social issues when invited to participate in discussions and to offer their ideas in response to “what if” questions.
This project showed us the power of collaborative teacher inquiry in curriculum development. Teachers discussed the importance and influence of having time to collaborate on curriculum design. They described feeling supported and celebrated by the school for their efforts to develop diverse ways of assessing student work. They felt motivated to participate in this project because time was provided to share ideas and resources with one another, to collaborate on planning lessons, to celebrate successes, and to discuss and support the challenges they face in teaching. Creating teacher buy-in was challenging, but we discovered the key to buy-in was first by engaging students through using the fair-unfair scenarios and then by providing teachers with the literacy kits.

The professional learning community that developed at Carleton Village is a model of self-directed, yet highly supportive collaboration among teachers who are working to develop inclusive curriculum. Many of the teachers involved in the project have been regular contributors to conferences and professional development workshops for both in-service and pre-service teachers. In the words of one of the authors, “the whole experience…was especially rewarding and contributed enormously to my professional learning curve.”

**REFLECTION**

As a result of the supportive administration, strong guidance from our partnership with OISE and the equity department at the TDSB, as well as ample time and resources to “think outside the box,” we created a process for moving forward in small, workable steps.

The Inclusive Schools pilot project at Carleton Village created a professional learning opportunity that allowed teachers, researchers, and the administration to gain an understanding of how a school
can transform, promote, and sustain an equitable and inclusive learning environment. Methods and strategies were developed through a common vision that helped us gain understanding of successful strategies that work to engage students in meaningful ways.

The development of literacy kits for teachers created a positive professional learning opportunity for our team. As a result of our work, we have presented at a variety of conferences, such as the Canadian Library Association’s national conference, May 2011, in Halifax, NS; and the Equity Conference for Teacher Candidates, OISE. We have also made collaborative presentations within the Toronto District School Board.

The kits were created specifically with the goal of creating partnerships within the Carleton Village community, the larger TDSB community, and with external organizations such as OISE, UNICEF, and international authors such as Mariatu Kamara (see Figure 8). The literacy kits have been catalogued and are available through the school library. It is our hope that they will inspire promising practices in other schools and provide opportunities for mentorship.

Figure 8. Author Mariatu Kamara with Curtis Ennis and Andrea Tufts at school event

REFERENCES


ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A very special thank you to Curtis Ennis who provided the kind of leadership and professional development opportunities that empowered teachers to create inclusive, engaging, and accessible curriculum and to design meaningful learning environments for the students of Carleton Village Public School. We couldn’t have done what we did without you, Curtis!

We acknowledge the Equity and Inclusive School Committee at Carleton Village Junior and Senior Public School: Cynthia Arcato, Thelma Akyea, and Andrea Tufts. We also acknowledge the valuable work of the teachers and students at Carleton Village Public School, the leadership of Principal Curtis Ennis and Vice-principal Gary Pieters, and supportive instructional leaders from the Toronto District School Board—David Ast and Marc Sprack.

Credit: all photos in this article by Beverly Caswell

BIOS

Beverly Caswell is the director of the Robertson Program for Inquiry-based Teaching in Mathematics and Science at the Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study, OISE, University of Toronto. An associate member of OISE’s Centre for Urban Schooling and a founding coordinator of OISE’s Inner City Option, Bev was teacher liaison for the Inclusive Schools project at Carleton Village Public School.

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Madeline Richards
in collaboration with Ann Lopez

Many of the students in my Grade 5 class are from immigrant families, and they have difficulty connecting to some of the texts used in the curriculum. Many students also have gaps in their reading and comprehension skills, and they need extra support to be successful. It was important for me to find ways to raise their level of interest in reading as well as their critical thinking skills. I wanted to explore this aspect of critical literacy to garner the students’ interest, connect with their experiences, and challenge them to think deeper about social issues. Fisher (2005) suggests that critical literacy provides an avenue for teachers who are seeking to develop culturally relevant and socially just pedagogies. Some emerging readers in my class were also struggling with their self-concept because they felt they were not strong readers.

The Toronto District School Board (TDSB) places high priority on literacy development of students at all grade levels, from kindergarten to graduation. As well as literacy initiatives at the elementary school level, the TDSB focuses on promoting adolescent literacy. In partnership with the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (LNS) of the Ministry of Education, TDSB elementary schools engaged in Teaching-Learning Critical Pathways (TLCP). This program is a professional learning model designed to help teachers improve their students’ reading, comprehension, and higher order thinking skills. English and literacy instructional leaders, families of schools literacy coaches, and LNS student achievement officers facilitate the TLCPs (TDSB, 2009). The TLCP at Flemington created an avenue for teachers to assess the students’ literacy skills and collaborate on ways to improve the overall literacy skills of students.
For example, one recommendation for making student assessment practices more inclusive involves discussing texts ahead of time so students can better understand the context and material before the assessment. Another recommendation is that teachers pay special attention to the kinds of questions they ask their students during the discussion of a book so they can raise the students’ level of critical thinking and social awareness. A recommendation for how to improve students’ ability to make inferences is to have them read texts that they can make connections to.

Many educators challenge the notion of standardized tests and their relevance in creating meaningful and authentic learning for students. Some argue that the standardized tests do not sufficiently take into account the lived realities and experiences of inner-city students since materials used in class do not relate to their context or experience. Neill, Guisbond, and Schaeffer (2004) refer to the importance of engaging students in authentic activities. Other studies show that student literacy among historically underserved students can be significantly increased through the use of culturally relevant texts and instructional strategies (Taylor et al., 2005). I was particularly interested in finding out how culturally relevant books could improve the literacy skills and achievement of emerging readers in diverse classrooms.

**PROCESS**

I examined the books I use in my classroom and decided to include texts to help students make connections to the characters and setting. I selected books that are culturally diverse and reflective of the students in the class, and that have the following characteristics:

- qualities of good children’s literature
- appropriate reading level for the students
- characters that the students could relate to
- contexts that are relevant to the students
- examples that could impact their own lives

The project began with the creation of reading circles for students to read individually and in pairs. The students used a variety of books in the reading circles. After the students read the books, I engaged the class in conversations about issues such as bias, representation, and voice. I explained to students what these terms meant and modelled the use of the terms so they could understand their meaning. This project focused on the students’ experience with one of the books and its impact on the class in terms of engagement and improvement in the students’ literacy skills and their feelings about reading. The book is called *Gifted Hands: The Ben Carson Story* (Carson & Murphey, 1990). It is about Ben Carson, a black man who had an inspiring life and became a renowned doctor in the inner city of Detroit. A large percentage of the students at Flemington Public School are black, and most students in my class are African Canadians. *Gifted Hands* connected with the students’ lived experiences. The students had different levels of reading and comprehension, so I tried a variety of strategies to encourage the students to read the book: for example, reading the chapters aloud to the students, pairing an emerging reader and a more accomplished reader, and also parental
support. Reading to their peers was very important for fostering the students’ confidence in reading. Audiotapes of the book were made available to students to take home and read with their parents.

After the students read each chapter they were placed in groups to discuss what they had read. I asked them to consider the following questions:

- What did you learn about the author?
- Did you learn something about the author that was different from what you thought it might be?
- How does the author represent groups other than his own?
- Is there bias in the text?

In the reading circles, I asked students to share their answers in their group and then with the class as a whole. During the discussions, students made connections between the text and their lived experiences and the society as a whole. I asked them to discuss notions such as what is meant by “peaceful resistance,” and they examined issues of prejudice, discrimination, and social justice within their own contexts. Students also made connections between the texts and the school’s character education program; they looked for examples in the text that they read.

I reinforced literacy conventions, such as contextual persuasion, with students individually and as a class by reading to them and showing examples on the blackboard. I also reinforced their ideas about perseverance and the challenges that Ben Carson experienced by having ongoing conversations about the book. In their journals, the students kept track of their progress in reading. Individually, they were supported and encouraged as they progressed. They also shared their progress with their parents.

An important aspect of my overall strategy was to infuse physical activities and movement during the reading process. At the start of class we had five minutes of physical activity (DPA: daily physical activity). The students remarked how energized they felt and that they did not get bored as quickly while they were reading.

**LEARNING**

During this project I collected data through student observations, reflection notes, teacher assessments, and conversations with students and parents. I noticed a variety of shifts: (a) in literacy skills and overall achievement, (b) in consistency of student efforts, and (c) in improvement of language fluency.

**Literacy skills and overall achievement**

The students indicated that the books they were reading were “interesting” and that they “learned a lot from them.” There was a marked improvement in their interest in reading and in classroom behaviour. After their assessments were marked and returned, I noted that the students were more
engaged and excited about learning. Because the students found the texts relevant, they were better able to make connections and find evidence to support their ideas. A positive effect of the project resulted from students working in small groups and individually on authentic activities that developed from the texts they were reading; these activities stimulated their imagination and thinking and improved their overall achievement.

**Consistency of student efforts**

Consistency of effort increased particularly among the emerging readers, there was more consistency of effort. They did not give up as easily and appeared more focused in their reading preparation. Once I established a system in the classroom for how students would engage with the texts and conduct their reading, this pattern was repeated each day to give students a sense of consistency. Reading with a purpose in mind seemed to make the students more interested. For example, when reading the story of Ben Carson, they prepared themselves in advance to tell the class what they had learned from this story. The audiotapes that the students took home also enhanced their reading fluency.

**Improvement in language fluency**

Through my observations and listening to the students read and express their ideas about the book, I noticed an improvement in their language fluency. They were able to pronounce words that they previously had difficulty with and understand the meaning of words within the context of the book. They were also able to read passages without halting. According to Guthrie and Wigfield (2000), active engagement in classroom activities improves cognitive learning. Engaged readers not only acquire literacy skills but also are better able to communicate with their peers and engage in social interactions. This project, particularly the experiences with culturally relevant texts, affirmed this finding.

**REFLECTION**

This project demonstrates the importance of connecting reading materials with the interests of students. The students were keen to read because *Gifted Hands* was interesting to them, and it resonated with their own life experiences. They were able to make connections to current social issues, which raised their awareness. This book and other culturally responsive and relevant books that they read over the course of the school year engaged the students in developing critical literacy skills and provided them with concrete examples of how they could make a difference. As a result of this project, I see the importance of teachers using resources that connect with students’ interests and life experiences. The students also experienced academic success, which is an important aspect of culturally relevant pedagogy. For students to experience academic success, their learning must be relevant to their lives and experiences. Critical literacy enables students to make meaning of their
learning, raises their critical thinking skills, and makes learning fun (Lopez, 2011). Because the students enjoyed the book, they were more engaged in the class, and discipline issues were lessened. The students’ self-esteem also improved, as they grew more confident in their reading abilities.

I have been engaged in critical work as a teacher for much of my career, and I try to provide my students with alternative experiences. This research reaffirmed for me the importance and relevance of critical approaches to teaching. I also believe that there is a strong connection between student self-esteem, behaviour in the class, and the resources used. My progressive approach to classroom discipline enabled me to engage with students in conversations that allowed them to reflect on their behaviour and take ownership of their own learning.

REFERENCES


BIO

Madeline Richards teaches Grade 5 students at Flemington Public School.

Ann Lopez, a faculty member in the Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education at OISE, is currently the acting academic director of the Initial Teacher Education program. She has a doctorate in Curriculum Studies from the University of Toronto, and she teaches courses in educational administration and leadership.
The purpose of my project was to use the Centre for Urban Schooling framework for culturally relevant and responsive teaching (Kugler & West-Burns, 2010) to improve the engagement of students and their understanding of math and science and the principles of design and technology. As a teacher in an inner-city school, I have found that the identity of my students is not necessarily reflected in the curriculum. My goal through the Inclusive Schools project was to improve student success by using an inclusive approach to re-envision the curriculum and develop programing. I wanted to address curricular expectations and, at the same time, bolster student identity. According to Nasir, “Identity plays a significant role in learning and elaborates the relation between learning and identity as one potentially fruitful approach for understanding culture, diversity, and mathematics learning” (Nasir & Cobb, 2002, p. 99). I wanted students to see themselves in the curriculum and become empowered through taking an active role in their own learning.
This project emerged from my involvement in professional learning of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy\(^1\) and my desire to develop curriculum that was more reflective and responsive to the students in my classroom. I was aware that mathematics and science act as gatekeeper subjects (Leonard, 2008) that are often required “as a passport to gain entry into practices that enjoy a different status in the wider society” (De Abreau & Cline, 2007, p. 125). Nasir makes a clear link between equitable practices and identity: “Equity is constructed as students are afforded access to identities within particular cultural practices” (Nasir & Cobb, 2002, p. 97).

This project aimed to empower groups of students who are typically underrepresented in the careers and academic areas of science and mathematics. Research in culturally relevant pedagogies offers promising practices for reaching students typically underserved by the educational system (Delpit, 1988; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Leonard, 2008). Aikenhead (1996) argues that “we should teach science embedded in a social and technological milieu that has scope and force for students’ worlds, worldviews, or practical experiences (respectively); and we need to dismantle barriers between students and science” (p. 18). At Carleton Village, inclusive programing was built on the students’ learning strengths and interests.

During the Inclusive Schools pilot project at Carleton Village, I worked with other teachers and with students in Grades 7 and 8 to develop learning environments for science, mathematics, and design and technology. The aim was to build on student strengths and harness their interests while addressing curricular expectations for each grade level. This was achieved through the implementation of the third annual “Invention Convention” at Carleton Village. The Invention Convention gave Grade 8 students the opportunity to demonstrate, and be assessed on, their understanding in math, science, design and technology, media, drama, and visual arts.

To prepare for the convention students selected an area of interest in science (such as hydraulics or pneumatics) and determined if there was a need in that area: a social or personal need, or a local, national, or global need. Students then worked to come up with a way to address that need by inventing a product that could be marketed to a target audience. The Invention Convention was a forum in which students presented their creations to an audience of their peers, teachers, school administration, and community members.

**PROCESS**

I was particularly interested in finding out how to design curriculum that represented and reflected the interests, ideas, and cultural backgrounds of the students in our school. As well, I wanted the teaching community to see the need to develop science curriculum to reflect the identities of the students in our school.

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\(^1\) The Teachers’ Professional Learning Series was offered in collaboration with the Centre for Urban Schooling, OISE, University of Toronto.
The Invention Convention grew out of the students’ questions during science class. For example, during a lesson on the use of fluid power in hydraulic systems, students began to wonder why this was an important concept to learn. I introduced the idea of fluid power and vectored thrust in the invention of the Harrier jet. Students then asked questions such as, “How would somebody come up with that idea?” They then began to wonder about the process of inventing and the world of the inventor. I shared a personal story with them about how my mother years ago collected and used a variety of empty paper towel rolls to place under her dish drainer so that it was angled enough for the water to drain into the sink. I told students that it is now possible to buy a drainer very like the one my mother had designed with paper towel rolls. And although my mother didn’t design and market the kind of drainer sold in stores today, she had the mind of an inventor because inventors are people who come up with solutions to everyday problems. This sparked students’ interest, and they saw that everyone has ideas and that science, mathematics, design and technology play an important role in bringing ideas to life.

Students then generated a list of ideas that would improve life in a variety of areas. They talked about (a) ideas for accessibility, social change, and environmentalism (these had arisen as a result of the teachers’ professional development sessions throughout the Inclusive Schools project); (b) ideas that had the possibility of bringing financial gain; and (c) ideas that focused mainly on scientific principles.

The next phase of the project was for students to begin the design process. Rather than rely strictly on an abstract, theoretical design, students had the opportunity to build working models of the designs they co-created. When the design process was driven by the story of the inventors, students became interested in the cultural histories of the scientists and the inventions. They began to look at inventors as scientists, and I used this as a starting point to bring issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality into science.

To prepare for the Invention Convention, I took a collaborative approach to designing an inclusive curriculum. This involved consulting with the students (through independent and group surveys) and co-planning with colleagues.

To understand how student identity could be reflected in my delivery of the curriculum I created a professional development workshop where my colleagues and I reflected on the following questions: Whom do I teach? What do I teach? How do I teach? Where do I teach? When do I teach? Why do I teach? We performed a gap analysis to identify what seemed to be missing in the curriculum and to produce strategies of how to address these gaps. The idea was to use consistent and responsive teaching and learning strategies across different areas of the curriculum so that student engagement would be increased and their opportunity for success would be maximized.
This collaboration gave me the opportunity to set relevant learning goals in a number of curriculum areas in both the regular and special education Grade 8 programs. I adapted a cross-curricular approach that clustered expectations from math, science, design and technology, language arts, drama, and visual arts. My approach also involved collaboration with other teachers who use a variety of teaching and learning strategies in literacy and numeracy.

I invited colleagues and students to collaborate on assessment material such as rubrics, and students were instrumental in identifying and outlining success criteria for numerous learning tasks during the unit. Several of these learning tasks are described below:

1. **Inventors.** Students learned about inventors of diverse backgrounds and how their products made life easier for people who have common lived experiences. In this activity, various strands in the curriculum were addressed.

2. **Marketing.** Students used mathematical concepts in marketing, such as product promotion, pricing, and placement. They needed to learn these concepts from a social justice perspective to calculate the costs for a product.

3. **Modelling.** Students investigated technical drawing, measurement, and prototype development. They learned to conceptualize, draw, and build a product using suitable material and accurate dimensions. Coming up with an idea and modelling it mathematically involved the use of scaling, figuring out costs, designing and calculating, planning how much product to make, finding a factory to produce the materials, and locating stores in which to sell the product.

4. **Writing.** Students created a persuasive media text that promoted their product to a specific target audience through advertising.

The format of the Invention Convention consisted of poster presentations and product demonstration. I invited members of the community to participate in a variety of ways in the Invention Convention. The audience consisted of media representatives, members of local community organizations and businesses, and representatives from other secondary schools in the district: in particular, schools that the students planned to attend. To promote student interest, I also used the opportunity to engage student role models, Carleton Village alumni, and past participants to share their challenges and successes in previous Invention Conventions. Later, students had opportunities to share their best practices both in a national invention exhibition and via the Internet following the creation of “Inclusive Television.” After presenting their work at Carleton Village, students went on to present at the North York Civic Centre with the Learning Partnership’s iCubed exhibition. They had to work on revising their presentations to address a wider audience.

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2 Inclusive Television was a student news channel; this project was spearheaded by the Grade 8 students at Carleton Village Public School.

3 The Learning Partnership is a not-for-profit organization that is dedicated to bringing together business, education, government, labour, policy makers, and the community to develop partnerships that strengthen public education in Canada. iCubed is part of The Learning Partnership with a goal to instill passion in all students for learning science, mathematics, and technology and to foster their entrepreneurial spirit.
LEARNING

As this project unfolded, I collected evidence of learning through my observations and students’ work and reflections. I collected anecdotal information through video recordings during the student presentations. I observed the engagement and participation of the student inventors as they explained the entire process involved in developing their product. I noticed that students tended to engage in conversations using technical, scientific, or design language.

When students became engaged in developing content knowledge, they were asking bigger questions—such as questions about accessibility and improving the lives of others—and they were immersing themselves in meaningful work. Because the project was based on their interests, ideas, and questions, they became inspired to design their own inventions.

A sample of student inventions that take everyday objects and use principles of design and technology to make them more accessible are shown in Figure 1. For example, in the design of “drawermatic,” students envisioned using a part of the body other than hands to open a drawer. This invention allows a person to either lean against a lever or use a foot to push a pedal or button to open a drawer.

Students designed the “pop-out closet” so that a person with limited mobility wouldn’t have to walk into a closet; instead the closet moves out toward the person. The design of this invention uses two simple machines: the first involves pushing a button to move the closet forward, and the second uses a “syringe” that turns a gear so that the closet can spin around.

The “wiper” was designed so that “instead of worrying about wiping off your glasses in the rain, you can simply put the wiper device on top of the glasses and it wipes away the rain, and then you can take the wipers off and go about your business” (Student designer, Grade 8).

Figure 1. Inventions designed by Grade 8 students at Carleton Village Public School

Credit: photos by Thelma Akyea
As they saw their ideas come to life, the students started to see themselves as scientists and inventors. This had a positive effect on their identities as learners and as contributors to the field of science, mathematics, design, and technology.

The Invention Convention was supported by learning initiatives in different Grade 8 subject areas. Students learned ideas about pricing, product design, promotion, and packaging in many of their classes. For example, in collaboration with the visual arts teacher they learned about appropriate media to use for their poster displays and layout techniques for the display board; in drama they worked on their promotional advertisements; in math they learned about pricing; in language arts they learned how to use persuasive writing to promote their product using a variety of means (pamphlets, posters, video, newspapers); in science they learned about procedural writing; in design and tech they learned about product design and packaging and how it would be produced in a factory.

This inquiry-based approach involved a partnership among the intermediate grade teachers; as a result, typically disparate school subjects became interconnected. Teachers in different classes had opportunity to see the students engage in many curriculum areas. They saw students involved in what they were doing: figuring out what they needed to do and what resources they required to build and refine their designs.

Students became interested in thinking about social change and addressing areas such as ability, race, and class. Depending on their question, they decided what societal issue the question related to. For example, how can you make an everyday item more accessible? How can we help people access things we take for granted? All of their questions were driven by the students’ interest in and growing understanding of accessibility and access issues in society. By the time of the convention, students presented their work and talked to the audience in a compelling way because they had examined the social implications during the design process.

The project provided opportunities to build relationships in our school’s community: we visited the library, local businesses, and recreation centre to put up posters advertising our event. We asked the local butcher to be a judge for the Invention Convention. Before, during, and after the convention, students were engaged in the community through consultation with parents, community vendors, high school staff, and alumni. This served to build community connections and enliven the school community. Through all this activity people gained a different impression of students in the community. The community was able to see the Grade 8 students in a new light, thus adding to their identity formation.

Students are most enthusiastically engaged when the Invention Convention is driven by their own questions and ideas. For example, one year I based the convention on environmental consciousness, and I had students figure out such things as the amount of resources they use and whether or not those resources are renewable. It turned out that the students were not fully engaged because they didn’t feel ownership for the direction of their study. I had imposed the design principles, and they would only get involved in researching something they were interested in. I’ve learned that if I impose rules for the convention there is little student buy-in.
I’ve also learned that the project is not so effective if the focus is only on the design and building process. Without establishing a foundation of the social, political, and historical underpinnings and implications of the design, the process is reduced to a walk-through of the scientific method, with students offering little explanation of their product beyond the apparent technical aspects.

One of the challenges of the project was that students requested more rehearsal time and explicit feedback. Consequently, we had two rehearsals that included assessment by the teacher and peers; the assessment was based on a student-generated rubric. Students decided on criteria for the presentation and were especially stringent when it came to deciding what would count as a Level 4 presentation: things that they learned about in a variety of subject areas, such as clarity of voice (from their drama class); content knowledge, the function of the device, and if it was a practical invention (from science class); and the visual aesthetic of the display board (from visual arts class). The students also created an assessment for how well the group functioned and collaborated.

Everyone in class gave each group feedback during the initial mock presentations. Then the groups revised their presentations based on the feedback and did the presentation again to see if they had improved. Students then incorporated the final revisions in preparation for the Invention Convention: where they would be assessed by teachers and community members.

Students required much more time than expected to incorporate the feedback they had received into their final presentation: clustering expectations helped provide this time. For example, everything was organized around central themes and big ideas surrounding the project so that all of the expectations that spoke to a certain big idea were clustered.

**REFLECTION**

This project helped me see the big picture of working with teachers and administrators in a collaborative project. The purpose of this collaboration was to provide students with ample opportunity to be successful. However, it was challenging to learn how to facilitate and maintain the students’ long-term task, especially because it depended on the participation of other teachers and having them include the project in their subject areas. It took coordinated planning among teachers to ensure that curriculum expectations were met through the goals of the invention convention project. Nevertheless, collaborative tasks that involved different teaching departments led to student success because students were given the time required to complete a long-term task that met the clustered, cross-curricular expectations.
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BIO

Thelma Akyea has a MEd in Sociology and Equity Studies from OISE, and has been a teacher in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) for seven years. She is a science and technology, design and technology, and mathematics teacher for the intermediate grades, and is currently a lead teacher for Models Schools for Inner Cities, TDSB.

Beverly Caswell is the director of the Robertson Program for Inquiry-based Teaching in Mathematics and Science at the Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study, OISE, University of Toronto. An associate member of OISE’s Centre for Urban Schooling and a founding coordinator of OISE’s Inner City Option, Bev was teacher liaison for the Inclusive Schools project at Carleton Village Public School.
As a kindergarten teacher, I wondered how I could increase the engagement of my students in their learning. When I previously tried teaching through inquiry, the process was mostly teacher-directed. I wanted to know if students would be more engaged if they were involved in the inquiry process themselves: student-directed inquiry.

Through taking the Science and Technology additional qualification course offered by the Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study and OISE, I was prompted to re-examine my teaching style and explore the teaching of science by using an inquiry-oriented approach. I hoped this approach would enable all students to access the curriculum and ultimately improve their achievement in school.

When I listened to conversations students were having about their daily life experiences, I realized that many students were already exploring their environments at home and in their communities. They were trying to make sense of their immediate environment. I saw that teaching science through inquiry could extend this curiosity. I reasoned that if these students were given a wide variety of learning opportunities and support, their curiosity would continue to deepen as they get older.
My interest in teaching and learning opportunities that support student inquiry were enhanced after my readings of others who were exploring student learning through facilitated inquiry (Igelsrud & Leonard, 1988) and through student-initiated inquiry (Tinnes & Chan, 1987). My project focused on student-initiated inquiry. The intent of this study was twofold: (a) to see if teaching through inquiry actually increased students’ engagement in their learning, and (b) to implement a true inquiry—as discussed in the Science and Technology additional qualification course. My question was: How does student-directed and teacher-assisted inquiry enhance student engagement?

**PROCESS**

This project arose out of a specific situation that students encountered and responded to in their school environment. It began with a group of kindergarten students observing ants swarming around a piece of candy in the playground. Some students wanted to squish the ants, while others wanted to protect them. By observing and listening to the students’ interactions, I used their comments and questions as a starting point for stimulating further learning: a teachable-learning moment. By starting with their observations, I was indirectly communicating to them that I considered their ideas and curiosities to be important and worth exploring. (See Figure 1.)

**Figure 1. Initial observations recorded on chart paper**

The following day, I told the students that their observations reminded me of a story. I read to them *Hey Little Ant* by Philip and Hanna Hoose (1998), where an ant is appealing to a child who is tempted to squish him. I selected this book because I hoped its unresolved ending with the open-ended question—“What do you think that child should do?”—would naturally lead to classroom discussion. Additionally, I wanted students to come to understand that all living things need to be treated with respect.
While many of the students were curious about the lives of ants, I soon learned that a few still held onto their previous views, and stated that the boy should squish the ant. Students formed a list of questions about ants that were important to them: How long do ants live? Do ants sleep? Reflecting on their responses, I realized that students needed to observe and interact with ants before they could better understand the characteristics of ants and why they need to be treated respectfully.

After reviewing the TDSB operational procedure for animals in the classroom, the students and I decided to order an ant nest. Rather than relying on the element typically associated with being an experimental inquiry, students asked questions that led to an observational inquiry about such topics as the ants’ life cycle, behaviour, movement, and day-to-day activities. In addition, prior to the arrival of the ant nest, the school arranged for the Beatrice Watson-Acheson Foundation to provide our class with their Kindness Program. A trained kindness program teacher, who was accompanied by a dog, provided students with a brief introduction on safe ways to watch and care for animals.

The classroom’s discovery centre housed the ant nest, feeding tubes, and magnifying glasses. This centre captured the interest of all the students, stimulated further inquiry, and nurtured a positive attitude toward science in general. By observing and interacting with the ant nest, students acquired and confirmed their understanding of different behaviour patterns of different living things. For example, one student said, “Briana didn’t put the fruit close to the ants, but the ants can smell it, and they are coming to the fruit.” Additionally, the open-ended nature of the discovery centre accommodated individual students with various needs and learning styles. Every student’s imagination and schema played a role in their level of inquiry.

I guided the student-inquiry by asking open-ended questions for different purposes (Harlan, 1988): for example, to promote reasoning, “Why do you think the worker ants are moving closer to the honey?”; to encourage critical thinking, “Why do some children step on ants?”; to reflect on feelings, “What do you like most about having an ant nest in our classroom?”

On a weekly basis, students were given the opportunity to be a part of this inquiry. The inquiry took approximately three months to complete. (See Figure 2.)

**Figure 2. Student feeding water and honey to the ants**
LEARNING

Students kept a science journal in which they wrote and sketched their observations. Journaling helped the students focus on details that they might have missed otherwise. Students also recorded their observations on an audio tape recorder. Listening to the tapes at a later time allowed students to recall information.

When students were introduced to the ant nest, their observations and questions were very general: for example, “the queen ant is bigger than the worker ant.” After a few weeks, their observations and questions became more specific and detailed: for example, “all the worker ants are helping one queen ant with her eggs.”

Their observations revealed to me that they understood the basic techniques of handling the ants. Students who initially stated that the boy should kill the ant were now educating our Grade 5 snack helpers about the importance of being a loving and responsible pet owner. They said, for example, “You can’t take the paper off the top of the ant nest because ants live underground, and it is dark underground.”

By listening to the students communicate about their new knowledge and discoveries, I was able to determine their level of understanding and engagement. By observing students and by documenting these observations using anecdotal notes over time and in a variety of contexts, I was able to see that they were engaged in the inquiry process—making their initial observations, asking questions, exploring the ant nest, talking about their explorations, listening to others talk, and sharing their new learning with their peers.

An inquiry-based approach to teaching science has assisted students in my class to develop an integrated understanding of science in general, rather than a compartmentalized understanding of the lives of ants. This environment served to engage the diverse student population in continually gaining new scientific knowledge and diverse forms of thinking. Bringing in a live ant nest played an important role in developing student interest and engagement in the topic.

Initially, I was challenged to “find time” for this student-initiated inquiry; however, upon further examination of the kindergarten curriculum, I realized that teaching through inquiry was at the heart of the science curriculum. Our inquiry addressed the first three overall expectations for science learning: (a) demonstrate an awareness of the natural and human-made environment through hands-on investigations, (b) conduct simple investigations through exploration using inquiry skills, and (c) demonstrate an understanding of and care for the natural world. Additionally, it crossed disciplinary boundaries into curriculum areas such as language and math.

It did not come naturally for me to share control for learning with students and let them shape their own learning. Initially, it was very difficult for me to do the observing and listening. By gradually sharing control, I learned that the curriculum should only be used as a guide. By listening to the students and by pursuing their questions, I was able to serve my students while following the curriculum.
REFLECTION

Shifting my usual teacher-initiated activities into an engaging student-initiated inquiry has supported the natural curiosity of my students. Our classroom inquiry was not planned with the end result in mind. Student interest changed from the beginning of the inquiry and took their own course. This happened because this was student-directed learning. Being flexible with my teaching and being responsive to the needs of my students helped to enrich the inquiry. I learned the importance of being on the lookout for student observations and discoveries and of encouraging students to ask questions about topics that pique their interest. If I were not open to the ideas of my students, we would not have had this enriching learning experience. This experience served to remind me not to be caught up in my own lesson plans. Students in kindergarten have shown me that they are capable of taking ownership of their own learning. Thus, student-directed learning has a legitimate and vital role in the primary grades.

I hope that this level of wonder about a certain topic will continue to motivate this group of students as they get older and as the conceptual depth of their learning increases. A balance between student-initiated inquiry and teacher-initiated investigations will continue to be an essential part of my science curriculum. Through the inquiry process, I realized that the interest of the students and their lived experiences can be tied back to the curriculum.

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Ant Nest Contact Information

Product: Formica Fusca (Black Field Ants), Pumice Stone Ant Nest (nest that contains tunnels, chambers and one that has a watering system), Microhabitat Outworld Company: The Ants Canada Ants Store
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my greatest gratitude to all the individuals who have supported me throughout this action research project. I would like to thank Cheryl Madeira who was my teaching instructor at Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study. She highlighted for me the importance of teaching science through inquiry. Mini Dindayal (OISE liaison) and Carmen Carrero de Salazar (research officer with Inclusive Schools project) for providing me with candid feedback and for being my mentors along the way. I would like to express my gratitude to the administrators at Grey Owl Junior Public School, Liz Holder (principal), Germaine Morrell (principal), Sohail Shaikh (vice-principal) for encouraging me to pursue this action research. Finally, I would like to thank the kindergarten students at Grey Owl Junior Public School, whose curiosity and enthusiasm shaped this inquiry.

BIO

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Mini Dindayal received her BEd from York University. During the Inclusive Schools project, she was a seconded OISE instructor from the Toronto District School Board, where she is a leader in Early Years learning, math education, and the Model Schools projects.
Using Technology in a Grade 6 Classroom to Engage Students and Improve Achievement

Rita Dublin
in collaboration with Mini Dindayal

Every day a world of new technology is bombarded into young people’s lives. By the time students in our elementary classrooms complete their secondary education, the technology they use today will be outdated. This situation raises the question, what are we doing as teachers to prepare our young people for the future?

Last year while teaching Grade 5, I noticed that students became very engaged in the science curriculum when I incorporated information technology into my lessons. I created groups with mixed ability and gave them freedom to investigate any science concept and to create and use various methods to communicate their learning to me and the class, including PowerPoint™, oral or written communication, and model-building. I created lessons that incorporated the use of information technology such as PowerPoint™, data projector, and board software on laptop. On the Internet I shared and read online books from the public library and stories from the TDSB website. I encouraged my students to use information technology in their presentations. The students applied the experience they gained from being in a classroom where technology was used for instruction on a daily basis, and they began experimenting with interactive science games to engage other students in their presentations.
Information technology refers to the use of computers and telecommunications to retrieve, store, and transmit information. As well as exposing students to the use of PowerPoint™, Internet, and laptops, I videotaped students during their activities and then showed them the videos by using a laptop and data projector. During the year of this project, I decided to further explore the enhanced engagement I noticed in science class and expand this to other curriculum areas, such as arts, social studies, and math.

My aim for this project was to implement the use of technology (Macbook™, SmartBoard®, Moodle©, and Internet) as a vehicle to engage and motivate my Grade 6 students. The idea was to use technology as a teaching tool and a tool for students to demonstrate their understanding of various concepts. My question was, How does the use of various technology tools engage students in their own learning and improve their achievement? To support my own learning, I attended the TDSB Grade 6 Mobile Computing Strategy (MCS) training session and the SmartBoard® workshop. I also attended ICT workshops available on KEY to Learn, such as SmartBoard®, Mobile Computer Strategies, and Moodle©, and I accessed information from online community sites, such as www.edugains.ca and www.exchange.smarttech.com.

**PROCESS**

Initially, I found out how many students had access to computers outside of school. I learned that even though most of my students had access to a computer, about one-third of them did not have an Internet connection at home. With this information, I allotted time in the class schedule for students to have access to the Internet at school. I then taught the students how to operate Macbook™ laptops, the SmartBoard®, and the data projector. I created interactive SmartBoard® lessons so the students could go to the board and use the tools. I also used lessons from www.exchange.smarttech.com to engage students in math.

With the help of the Mobile Computer Strategies community, I gained access to resources, such as Geometric Sketchpad software, which I used to teach math; in this case, I asked students to use technology to create transformation patterns. (See Figure 1.) The students used Photo Booth and iMovie on the laptops to record their math conferences, which were placed in a bank for review and reference in future classes. This helped the students who were too shy to present their math solutions to the entire class. They also used iMovie to create commercials for media literacy. In addition, I created a classroom wiki and a blog page that we used to share information.

**LEARNING**

As my project unfolded, I collected evidence of learning through the use of a survey and tests to evaluate students’ performance. Following are two examples of evaluation questions: (a) Using graphing software, collect, organize, and display the results of a survey; (b) Given coordinates of a 2D shape, draw the shape on the sketchpad and transform it using the sketchpad tools. (See Figure 2.) My intention was to find out if students were able to use the Macbook™ programs for data management.
Figure 1. Students using laptops to do geometry

Figure 2. EQAO question done with Geometric Sketchpad

First I rotated the rectangle 90° clockwise about point C. Then I translated it 8 units to the right and 6 units up. Last I drew a line of symmetry and labeled the points A and B. I also reflected the shape on the other side.
I conducted a survey to find out how the students felt about using technology. Following are some of the questions:

- **How often do you use the computer to do research?**
  - Daily
  - Weekly
  - Monthly
  - Never

- **How often do you use the computer to complete homework?**
  - Daily
  - Weekly
  - Monthly
  - Never

- **How often do you use the computer to play games?**
  - Daily
  - Weekly
  - Monthly
  - Never

- **I like doing math on the Macbook™ in class.**
  - Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree

- **I like doing math using the textbook only.**
  - Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree

- **I like doing math on the SmartBoard®.**
  - Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree

As a result of this project, I have seen an increased interest in science, social studies, and math. Most students have moved up one level in math, for example, from C to B. The students performed better when they were asked to show what they know by using technology. Most students prefer to type their essays instead of writing them because they can use software such as Read and Write Gold for assistance. When students are asked to do research on a topic and to present it to the class, most students are now choosing to use PowerPoint™ presentations and video clips.

Students’ skills in using iMovies to record and present their strategies and solutions during math congress have greatly improved. Now they add to their presentations cool features that they have discovered on their own. This enhances their presentation skills and aids in their communication.

I have also noticed that students are more engaged and on-task in the classroom, and they are taking ownership for their learning. They now see learning as fun. When students are in an environment that caters to various learning styles, I see increased opportunity for students to become engaged in learning and to demonstrate knowledge. When asked about the use of technology in her classroom, one Grade 6 student said,

> **When we are learning math, instead of using paper and pencil to answer questions, we use technology. With the help of software called Understanding Math 2008 and a laptop, we practise math concepts. We also use the Geometric Sketchpad to do geometry. The use of technology makes math seem like fun to us…. Last year in Grade 5 my group did a PowerPoint™ presentation on ancient civilization. I think we learned much more about ancient civilization on a PowerPoint™ than on a bristol board. With PowerPoint™ we can do as many slides as we want. With bristol board we have limited space. Now, do you see how, not only me, how my classmates use technology? I believe that every classroom in our school should use technology.**
One challenge we encountered during this project was related to students’ accessibility to technology outside the classroom. Some students were unable to add comments on our blog or practise at home what they had learned at school.

REFLECTION

This project has made me realize how important it is to use technology in my classroom. I now try to incorporate some form of technology in every lesson on a daily basis. I will continue to keep abreast of new technology by attending workshops. I intend to upgrade my wiki and blog page for every new class I have in the future. For teachers who are thinking of using technology in their classrooms, I advise them to take advantage of learning opportunities, such as the TDSB’s Key to Learn, and then share their knowledge with students and watch them soar.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank the Toronto District School Board for giving me the opportunity to teach in Canada. I also wish to thank the principal of Grey Owl Junior Public School, Liz Holder, for providing me with the support I needed during this project, and my Grade 6 students who participated in the project.

BIO

Rita Dublin has been working with the Toronto District School Board since January 2005. Born in Guyana, South America, she taught in the Caribbean for 14 years before coming to Canada.

Mini Dindayal received her BEd from York University. During the Inclusive Schools project, she was a seconded OISE instructor from the Toronto District School Board, where she is a leader in Early Years learning, math education, and the Model Schools projects.
Grey Owl is an inner-city school, where the students come from a variety of cultures and backgrounds. Many students do not speak English as their first language, and so the languages spoken at Grey Owl include Tamil, Urdu, Hindi, and Gujarati. The school has a commitment to being culturally responsive to students’ needs through their work and the curriculum. I share this commitment and work hard to make the classroom inclusive and to honour the students’ backgrounds and cultures.

I viewed the Inclusive Schools project as an opportunity to continue to serve students in an equitable and inclusive fashion. I was very interested in learning how the arts could be an effective tool for building and enriching equity in the classroom. I wanted to learn more about the connection between dramatic arts and language and to integrate dramatic arts and visual arts as part of student learning; in this way I would be able to illustrate to the students the value of the arts.

I have always been passionate about the arts, and as a student I used to get lost in doing sketches during a lesson. I was engaged in the lesson, but I preferred to sketch, and for a long time I felt the arts and other academic studies were at odds, or at the least, the arts were not given the same value as maths, language, and the sciences.
When I entered teaching, I wanted to use the arts as a means of personal expression with the same value as other academic subjects. I have had some success incorporating the arts in the classroom, but it has been a struggle to convince some others of the value of arts in the learning process and as part of the curriculum.

After embarking on the Inclusive Schools project and meeting with Debbie Nyman, facilitator and dramatic arts instructor, I began to see how the arts, specifically dramatic arts and visual arts, could be integrated directly into the curriculum to both inform my teaching and deepen the students’ understanding. I was introduced to strategies I could use in my language program: strategies designed to engage and motivate the students to speak, listen, and write. This approach provided a way to develop students’ literacy skills, collect data for several assessment purposes, and encourage and value personal expression. I was also introduced to drama strategies that I used to bring the themes of a story to the students in a meaningful way.

**PROCESS**

I worked with Debbie Nyman to develop a drama structure using the picture book, *The Flower*. We included in our planning the project goals and my literacy goals and needs. The students worked in different groupings using a variety of strategies, such as tableau, role playing, and writing-in-role, to develop skills in speaking, listening, problem solving, collaborating, and writing. Following each session we assessed the success of the students, their level of engagement, and we determined their next steps. I continued the work on my own when Debbie wasn’t there, and I shared results with her during her next visit or by email. We agreed to involve all students. We moved the desks, and then worked in the empty space for periods of about two-and-a-half hours with a few interruptions.

Debbie led the class through a few activities that engaged the students and set the context. These activities included a game, a movement activity, and group work for sharing their thoughts and feelings about flowers. We read through a section of *The Flower*. Students created visual representations of the gloomy world of the main character, Brigg. They would later create visual representations of the contrasting world.

My goal was not only to use the picture book to integrate the arts in student learning but also to gauge student comprehension, develop students’ understanding of points of view, and explore empathy. Debbie suggested that we work in role to meet these objectives. At one point in the story, after Brigg has taken the forbidden book from the library, I took the role of Brigg, and the students were in the role of friends. I asked them for advice: “What should I do? I have taken the book. Should I tell someone? What might happen to me?” Students were engaged and thoughtful in their responses and showed sympathy for Brigg. They had never worked with me in role, and it took them a few moments to adjust and accept me as Brigg. I later noticed that as the students gained experience with this strategy, they were more comfortable and their responses were deeper and more connected. Following the role play I asked students to take the information they had learned about Brigg and the story and write a letter in the role of Brigg to someone close to them, a parent or
sibling or friend, telling them what he had done and how he was feeling about it now. They wrote their letters on file cards. All the students seemed engaged and excited to write and quickly began the activity.

This role-play led to the writing-in-role assignment, followed by discussion for the whole class and a debate on the moral issue of breaking rules and on making a choice to risk for the greater good. We began by asking the students how they felt about Brigg taking the book: “Do you think it was okay for Brigg to take a book from the library that he wasn’t supposed to read?” Most of the students said, no, it wasn’t right for him to take the book. He could lose his job. He could go to jail. For my own part, I was surprised. I thought his act of “stealing” would be viewed by the students as an “ode to Robin Hood” rather than simply an illegal act. When we later asked if they would turn the boy in for his actions, most students said they would. Only one student was divided on the issue: she thought his actions may have been wrong, but she didn’t want him to be fired because his reasons for stealing the book may have been reasonable. Her voice and opinion were instrumental in encouraging the group to see more than one side of the issue, to consider other possibilities, and most importantly that it was acceptable to consider such possibilities. The conversation continued about what actions they would take if they were in the library with Brigg when he took the book. Some said that if they saw him taking it they wouldn’t say anything because they didn’t want to tell and get in trouble themselves. Others said they would tell because he had stolen the book, and even though he may lose his job, he did an illegal act and should face the consequence.

Students then participated in a debate, arguing whether or not Brigg should be turned in for his actions. To prepare for the debate students took sides, brainstormed, and wrote out their arguments to support their positions. The debate was animated as students cheered their side’s supporting arguments. A grin of “take that” upon stating the lack of reasons given for having banned the book in the first place. A nod of self-approval after stating that the reasoning behind denying Brigg access to the book does not need to be explained when it has been explicitly stated that the book should not be read. Students argued with strong language, and thoughtful and logical arguments. Students were looking at the problem presented in a critical manner.

After the discussion and debate, the class was asked to have a “blind vote” (placing their heads down on their desks and putting their hands up) to state which side they supported now that they were given an opportunity to discuss the reasoning behind turning in Brigg or not. Most students had changed their mind from their initial decision; most decided they would not turn in Brigg because they now believed that he could or would have a positive change on his community by the end of the story. The drama work had deeply influenced their learning and the way they learned. This was stated in the reflection after the debate.

The drama work was then extended to examine children’s rights and freedoms. This topic grew out of the idea that all children should have access to books and education, and perhaps a say in whether any book should be banned, or a say in governing. In the discussions of the rights of children in the world, the students shared stories from their homes and their countries of birth to express what they believed should be universal rights for all children. This discussion was continued into Black History Month through further drama exploration of stories of freedom.
This drama and discussion of a fictional character and situation led us to a discussion of real-world issues. The students considered how they would respond to a parallel issue in their community. In this way I learned how they view their world and themselves in their community and the world. In some ways, the work in drama freed them to express their authentic feelings, and everyone was included and part of the discussion.

**LEARNING**

Throughout this project I collected examples of the students’ writing-in-role and visual arts representations. I used the rubrics and checklists from the Treasure Chest to assess role playing, writing-in-role, and tableau, as well as their overall participation. I collected evidence of learning through observation and kept my own anecdotal notes. I sometimes observed as I worked alongside the students when I was in role with them, or when challenging them as they worked in groups.

It became evident to me as we worked on the project that this approach provided opportunities for students to express their learning through dramatic and visual art forms rather than the more traditional written tasks. For example, students expressed their understanding of the character through strategies such as role-on-the-wall and writing-in-role rather than through the more traditional character sketches and analyses. These strategies provided students with comfortable ways to express their learning with success they didn’t always experience. This was especially evident for one student, who was in a home-school program and often tried to avoid writing in any form. During Debbie’s lessons on *The Flower* I saw a new side to her, one that revealed the wealth of potential I knew was in her. Within the arts she may have felt that the same judgements were not present even though the expectations were similar. The success she experienced in the drama carried her into the writing and gave her confidence and a purpose to write. This was a critical lesson for me.

Students were asked to write letters in the role of Brigg, on one side of a file card. The student had been very engaged in the drama and the role play and had participated enthusiastically and thoughtfully. I had not informed Debbie and based on her participation and engagement she did not know that the student was a home-school student. The student decided to write not one but two letters, one on each side of the file card. She was excited about the activity, and she wanted to go beyond the work that was expected of any student in the class. She showed that she had the ability; she just needed an activity or an avenue that would motivate her to show it.

One thing to note about the student’s success in the activity is that she went to Debbie before doing the activity and said that she was sorry that she wasn’t a very good writer but she wanted to write the two letters. I learned through this that students do not always avoid activities because they are lazy or because the activities are not enough fun, but maybe because they feel insecure as students, and particularly as writers.
The drama activity gave all the students a purpose to write, and I was able to assess their comprehension and language skills through the writing. The drama work, role playing in particular, gave them oral language experience and, most importantly, an opportunity to experience the different ideas and thoughts of their classmates, which they could build on in their writing.

The project helped me gain insight into how my students think, their life experiences, and how they view the world. The drama provided them with the safety to comment on a world that was not necessarily their own. Within this fictional world they expressed their own values and felt comfortable to share these values, and to even challenge these values and alter their thinking. It cannot be overstated how much I was able to learn about the students and they learned about each other during the sessions with Debbie, particularly because of the safety they felt to express themselves in role playing, writing, and illustrating.

I also observed some students had a “black-or-white” way of thinking; they didn’t try to see the shades of grey involved in issues of morality. I now understand how the arts can deepen the students’ thinking. Deepening the understanding of an issue and feeling empathy for characters and their situations will hopefully lead students to more inclusive practices in the classroom, school, and greater community.

It was a great benefit to have a facilitator in the classroom, but this type of support is not readily available in most classrooms. It is possible to run a dramatic program in the classroom, but it is much easier with additional support and an extra pair of eyes. I know that continuing this work will be challenging without a mentor facilitator.

Another issue was space. With the 32 students in a portable, finding space for all students to begin practising their roles or performances was difficult because chairs and tables had to be shoved to the side; this also cut down on teaching time because everything had to be put back in place at the end of the class.

In terms of assessment, the view prevails that pen-to-paper tasks are more important or better as an assessment tool than are the arts, which may be considered subjective and vague. At the elementary level there’s a focus on language and mathematics rather than the arts-based courses. Being able to rely on art and drama for language assessment on a regular basis may be challenging, especially in a system where most standardized tests don’t include the possibility for students to “act” or “draw” how a character might have felt in a given scenario.
PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

The work with Debbie Nyman contributed to the success of this project, including some of the revelations about my students and my own teaching practice. Through this work, I learned new strategies and better understood how to make learning more accessible to all the students. I also learned how drama work is closely tied to the development of literacy skills, point of view, and inference. The work in drama provided the students with many opportunities for listening, speaking, and writing in meaningful ways.

When Debbie joined the class, I learned both as teacher and in a participatory capacity. When I was not actively teaching, I had opportunity to record my responses to students, which I could take home and reflect on at a later time. Consistently, teachers are told that we need to differentiate instruction for our students to cater to their various learning styles. For myself, I learn best when I’m given a chance to see something happen and then an opportunity to try it on my own. Under Debbie’s guidance I was able to try out strategies and receive feedback, and this really helped me develop as a teacher, particularly as a teacher of the dramatic arts.

In future I would like to explore how the arts can be used to develop student skills in non-art courses. For example, can the arts be used to develop mathematical skills and, if so, to what extent and how? I have always had a passion for the arts but had never applied this fully. Having seen the success my students had through the arts during this project, I want to see what new doors the arts can open when the arts are properly integrated into other areas of the students’ education.

REFLECTION

I entered this project wanting to develop my teaching practice in the areas of equity and the arts. The drama strategies created many opportunities for students and the teacher to work together, and to understand the importance of listening to each other and respecting each other’s thoughts and feelings. These strategies created safety for the students to move and to draw, to express their thoughts and feelings. These strategies helped students develop skills that will transfer to other areas of learning. The project provided meaningful learning for all the students, and it helped to build and reinforce an inclusive environment in our classroom. The students found different ways to be successful and this, so to say, levelled the playing field in the classroom. All the students were highly engaged; they found their way to work willingly and enthusiastically together to learn and to find and express meaning. We learned to negotiate together. And most importantly, we learned about each other in a deeper way. Knowing their true feelings and giving them opportunity to share their feelings in a safe environment is an important step in helping students better understand the world and their options, and to imagine possibilities for now and in their future.
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BIO

Wrensford Simmonds teaches Grade 5 at Grey Owl Junior Public School.

Debbie Nyman is an instructor of the Dramatic Arts Additional Qualifications program at OISE/UT. She has been a classroom teacher and instructional leader with the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), has written curriculum documents and resources for the TDSB and the Ministry of Education, and is co-author of *Drama Schemes, Themes, and Dreams*. 
Deepening Inclusive and Community-Engaged Education
K’naan and Kente Cloth: A Foray into Culturally Responsive Mathematics Instruction

Daniel Yamasaki in collaboration with Carmen Carrero de Salazar and Beverly Caswell

In June 2012, when I learned I would be teaching Grade 6 for the first time, I was immediately concerned about how I would teach mathematics and adequately prepare my students for the Education Quality and Assessment Office (EQAO) standardized test. I have been an educator for the past decade and have taught in both primary and junior schools, but never in Grade 6: a so-called EQAO year. I asked myself, How can I be an effective math teacher? How can I engage students with the subject? Will my class be prepared to take the EQAO test?

I am particularly interested in learning how culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) can be used to more fully engage students in math problem solving and, at the same time, prepare them for the EQAO assessment. Much has been written about how schools are microcosms of the larger society and that social injustices such as racism, classism, and sexism can become manifest in schools through curriculum (Esposito & Swain, 2009). CRP offers ways of teaching that increase student achievement and engagement in school and academic tasks. Culturally relevant curriculum is “based on the assumption that when academic knowledge and skills are situated within the lived experiences and frames of reference of students, they are more personally meaningful, have higher interest appeal, and are learned more easily and thoroughly” (Gay, 2002, p. 106). Rather than looking at marginalized
groups of students as somehow deficient in mathematical skills, research in culturally relevant pedagogy looks at what conditions lead to the outcomes (Gay, 2000; Leonard, 2008). My interest in CRP is also informed by the societal systemic inequities that “push out” English Caribbean, Portuguese, Spanish, and Somali students at higher rates than the rest of the student population in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) (Brown, 2006). I hope to contribute to mitigating the problem of systemic discrimination by adapting the current curriculum in ways that will make it more inclusive, contextualized, and relevant to the culture and experiences of the students in my class (TDSB, 2009).

As a classroom teacher, I am largely responsible for student achievement, which in the TDSB is measured by norm-referenced or standardized tests (e.g., EQAO tests, CAT-4 test) and teacher developed evaluations (e.g., summative assessments, tests, quizzes, classroom tasks). The debate around the validity of standardized testing is ongoing. For instance, Leonard (2008) argues that statements that equate student achievement with ability are “false on premise because performance does not equate to intelligence” (p. 130). A study of inherent biases in the standardized tests used to create mathematics achievement scores would be a worthwhile endeavour. Gutiérrez (2008) suggests that alternative forms of assessment would provide a clearer picture of learning as a process rather than as a static phenomenon. Regardless of where students stand on standardized testing, EQAO scores are used in my school district as primary indicators of student achievement and school efficacy. Student achievement is a major indicator in the TDSB improvement plan, and significant financial and human resources have been put into this effort. As a Grade 6 teacher, I am expected to make EQAO test preparation a part of my math program.

**PROCESS**

For my project I was committed to investigating the following questions:

- How might culturally relevant pedagogy enhance student engagement and achievement for my diverse group of Grade 6 students?
- How can I best prepare my students for writing the EQAO?

I began the year by giving the students a number of questions from previous EQAO tests. This preliminary data revealed that students were struggling to learn how to find the area of irregular-shaped figures. With that in mind, I sat down and started rewriting some of the test questions to make them more culturally responsive for students in my class. Working with OISE research officer, Carmen Carrero de Salazar, I looked at the cultural background of our students and their interests, and we came up with two areas of interest upon which to build our lessons. The first was the rapper, musician, singer, songwriter K’naan and his personal history of being a Somali–Canadian immigrant. Another was kente cloth, which is a traditional weaving product from Ghana.

Based on the previously mentioned discussions on students’ cultural background and interests, I used the Ghanaian tradition of kente cloth and the music of K’naan as context for the problem-solving
questions that I would pose to the students. I set out to learn more about traditional kente weavers and to find actual kente cloth that I could use during the lesson to further engage students. Fortunately, there was a teacher at my school who had travelled to Ghana and was willing to lend me articles of clothing made from kente cloth. Armed with a better understanding of the context that I wanted to use, I reviewed the textbook resources and EQAO practice test questions that addressed the targeted math skills. I began modifying the lessons to use a three-part lesson plan approach, including a “minds-on” (activating and reviewing prior knowledge of the math skill), “hands-on” (allowing students to collaboratively problem solve using their own strategies), and reflection (time for students to share their thinking with the class). Simultaneously, I was looking for ways to embed a more culturally relevant context in the math questions I would pose to my students.

For example, one measurement question from the EQAO test involved planting peas, beets, and carrots in garden plots in a farmer’s field. I made this question more relevant to their youthful, urban lives by asking students how many seats a stadium would hold for a K’naan concert. I created a brochure showing a seating plan for K’naan’s concert venue, including a VIP section, gold section, blue section, and red section (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. K’naan concert math question**

*Grade 6 Math*

*Unit: Whole Numbers*

*K’naan Concert*

The seating area at a K’naan concert are 89 seats long and 48 seats wide. The seating areas have been divided into 4 sections (red, green, blue, gold).

How can you find how many tickets can be sold for each section?

How many tickets can be sold for the concert?

Here are the costs of tickets for each section:

Blue: $25 • Green: $20 • Red: $50 • Gold: $85 (includes a backstage pass)

How much money could the concert promoters make if they sell out the concert?

Do you think it is fair to charge these amounts to see a K’naan concert?
A second question in the EQAO test involved finding the area of an irregular shape. To change this question, I asked students to find the area of an irregular-shaped piece of Ghanaian kente cloth (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Math question for finding the area of an irregular-shaped piece of kente cloth

The second part of the lesson had students collaborating in small groups or pairs, actively solving the problem (see Figure 3). As students work on the problem, I circulated, observing and noting student strategies, mathematical thinking, and language. I tried to extend students' thinking by asking students probing questions. In the third part of the lesson I asked students to share their solutions with the class. My objective in this part of the lesson was to facilitate a discussion, highlight student thinking, and point out their divergent strategies for problem solving.
The purpose of this project was to apply culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) in math instruction; it was not necessarily meant to show a correlation between CRP and student engagement and achievement. Therefore, there was no effort to set up the project as an experimental design. However, compared to assessment data based on previous math problems involving the same skill, my assessment data did show that student achievement in math improved when I used a culturally relevant approach.

During the project, I collected data from three sources to better understand the value of using culturally relevant learning strategies. I looked at the performance of students on practice or sample items from previous standardized tests, and then looked at the performance of students on the same concepts that were introduced using a culturally responsive approach. I used a rubric that assessed student ability to explain their solution systematically, their use of posters and manipulatives to explain their strategies and support their solutions, and their use of mathematical language. I also informally observed student engagement with the task, that is, their on-task behaviour and their perseverance in completing the task. Then I compared this data to the data I had collected earlier in the year from previous math problem-solving questions that had been taken verbatim from text resources and did not incorporate culturally relevant practices. According to post-test results, six to seven students in the class shifted from a Level 2 score to a Level 3 score. This result definitely made this work worthwhile.

Students’ written responses to the open-ended, sample EQAO test item about finding the area of an irregular-shaped figure showed that only a few students achieved at Level 3 or Level 4. However, when the students were presented with a similar test question using a culturally relevant context, nearly half the class demonstrated Level 3 or Level 4 responses.
I attribute the increase in the number of students achieving Level 3 or 4 to the engagement of students during the minds-on portion of the lesson, where some students who were typically hesitant to engage in math now saw the lesson as something relevant to their lives; in this case, the K’naan concert related to their urban lives, and the kente cloth question related to students for whom this was part of their cultural heritage. This allowed students to move from a discussion on the context to a discussion on the math skill—finding the area—and then carry their engagement into their solution strategies.

Student engagement also increased at the beginning of the lesson, as measured from observations of on-task behaviour; however, perseverance with finishing the task remained at about the same level. The quality of students’ oral responses (talking about their thinking) also increased. Based on my informal observations, student on-task engagement and interest in the activity was high in the first 20 to 30 minutes, but waned after that time. When this occurred I asked them probing questions to help them clarify their thinking.

I attribute the lack of increase in students’ perseverance with the task to the complexity of the mathematical concepts that were required to solve both of the challenges. This result demonstrates that it is not enough to simply change the wording of a math problem to reflect cultural aspects of students’ lives. The teacher must also apply other sound instructional strategies, such as offering multiple entry points to the specific math content, encouraging collaboration, supporting students’ strategic thinking, and developing students’ stamina to persevere with a math question.

**REFLECTION**

This project has led me to some observations and recommendations for any educator wishing to make math instruction more culturally relevant. First, engagement most often precedes student motivation and interest. Achieving student engagement can be challenging, but using CRP in math allowed me to value students’ cultures, knowledge, and experiences, and give students every opportunity to acquire the math skills needed to be successful on the EQAO test. Second, it is clear that traditional mathematics resources are not meeting the needs of culturally diverse classrooms. By critically examining these resources through the lens of CRP, I realize that math questions—whether from textbook material or EQAO math questions—are presented in a way that is almost devoid of cultural relevance. I have become more critical and skilled at adapting and developing a CRP math curriculum. Finally, this project has raised my awareness of the need to use students’ backgrounds and interest to bridge home and school cultures, and to engage students intellectually, socially, and emotionally. As a result, I have developed a more critical perspective with respect to the way math resources and standardized tests are presented to our students.

Due to the lack of available culturally relevant resources, I recommend the creation of a bank of culturally relevant math problems, shared on a school-wide, board-wide, or online basis. Finding culturally relevant math resources can be a challenging and time-consuming task for a classroom teacher. Hopefully, as more teachers learn about CRP, it will be easier to access and share CRP math classroom resources.
REFERENCES


ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Carmen Carrero de Salazar for her support in this project.

BIO

Daniel Yamasaki has been a teacher and school administrator in Canada and overseas for the past 13 years. He is currently teaching at an international school in Colombia.

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Towards a More Inclusive Curriculum through Visual Arts

Hassan Ali in collaboration with Beverly Caswell

In my many discussions with students of South Asian, Vietnamese, Black, and Asian West Indian ethnicity, I’ve learned about a variety of instances in which they felt their culture was less valued and less represented than the dominant, mainstream culture in Canada. These students, both young and old, seemed reluctant to share or be associated with the products of their cultures—such as art, music, and foods—that are integral to their own cultural heritage.

Educational literature has examined the idea that cultural themes and connections are critical for identity formation and individual development (Delpit, 1998; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lee, 2008; Nasir, 2002). Cultural themes and connections are given expression in forms such as the arts, religion, and rituals. The loss or rejection of these forms often results in a loss of self and thereby low self-esteem. One of my responsibilities in the education of my students is to begin the process of cultural acceptance, cultural conservation, and the understanding cultural diversity.

Students today live in a dynamic and increasingly diverse society. It is imperative that they learn about their differences as well as their shared values.
As a special education teacher trained as a visual arts teacher, I focused my project on enhancing student learning through integrating cultural themes and visual arts in the curriculum. I was particularly interested in finding ways to infuse culturally relevant pedagogy into the design of an arts-based curriculum for special education students. Specifically, I wanted to address the following question: How could I better integrate cultural themes and visual arts to empower and affirm the personal identity of students from a minority or racialized background?

In this journey I looked for ways within the confines of the curriculum to adapt subject content so it would match the diverse perspectives of students in my learning disabilities classroom. While my original idea for this project was to integrate cultural themes and visual arts, I also developed ways to integrate culturally relevant mathematics, language, and geography into my visual arts program. The fact that the demographics in the school community include a high proportion of recent immigrant groups was a compelling reason for me to explore and create an innovative and culturally responsive curriculum across a variety of subject areas.

My project was focused on a visual arts assignment and based on the following hypotheses:

- The culturally relevant aspect of the assignment will provide motivation for students to be engaged in the work.
- The assignment, if highly engaging, will assist students in maintaining focus and concentration—a skill that would hopefully be transferred to other areas of learning.
- The assignment must first provide opportunities to learn skills and techniques used with the medium of acrylic.
- The acquisition of techniques with the medium will lead to subsequent original, creative, and more satisfying work.
- The students will be greatly inspired if they work with authentic materials and the proper tools that artists use, for example, canvas, easels, and palettes.
- The artwork, if followed through to completion, will be a source of personal pride for the artist and consequently build self-esteem.

**PROCESS**

**Introducing artwork by artists from different cultural backgrounds**

Initially, I introduced artworks by artists from a variety of cultural backgrounds as inspiration for the students’ work. I used the opportunity to honour the cultural contributions of these artists, who my students may not have been aware of, and also to make links between these artists’ contributions and those of cultural figures in mathematics and science. I selected artwork related to the cultural heritage of the students in the class.
For a visual arts assignment I asked students to take up the challenge of creating a reproduction of an original painting by an artist of their choice. First, the teacher and the class collaborated in making a list of artists. Then students selected an artist from the list and prepared a biography of that artist. Students did not simply copy the artist’s work, they learned about the life story of the artist. In this way the project became a meaningful learning experience. During the time of this project students completed paintings inspired by artists from Jamaica, St. Lucia, Trinidad, China, Nigeria, Guyana, Portugal, Greece, Canada, USA, India, Vietnam, Spain, and Haiti. The choice of the Haitian artist was in response to the suffering that resulted from the tragedy of the Haitian earthquake on December 26, 2009.

**Visual arts assignment**

Once they had completed a biography of the artist, the students selected a painting to reproduce from works online or in textbooks. I prepared a half-page colour print of the selected artwork for each student. I spent time with each student discussing the choices they made, bearing in mind the difficulty inherent in reproducing such a work. Where necessary, I made suggestions for possible alternative choices. The goal of the assignment was for students to recreate the original as closely as possible, achieving the same effects of texture, colour, shadow, and light. This meant they needed to keenly observe the details of the original from the colour copy, then replicate it on canvas in a medium that the students had not previously used.

Once they decided on the specific artwork, I provided each student with a canvas, and they began sketching on canvas, leaving out small details. Students displayed much enthusiasm in working like “real artists” on these canvases. The preliminary sketches were completed with minimal input from me. Then I demonstrated acrylic painting on canvas. In the first painting class, I emphasized the importance of beginning with the “big picture” and advised students to tackle the background first, if the particular artwork lent itself to this approach. At this point, students demonstrated some apprehension, and I was able to assist them with mini-lessons on topics such as colour mixing, the properties of acrylic paint compared to oil paint, the care of brushes and other equipment, and clean-up procedures. Eventually, the students eased themselves into a comfortable pace and enlarged the sketches onto full-sized canvases with an admirable sense of proportion (see Figure 1). In fact, they were inspired and became adventurous. In working with the students, I encouraged them to pay attention to the brush strokes of the artist and how these sometimes translated into a unique style.

As the work progressed, I was often called upon to demonstrate some technique: for example, how to achieve a certain effect, and how to obtain a specific tint or shade. This kind of teaching on a “need-to-know” basis continued until the painting was completed. Occasionally, after school I worked on my own painting and would often find students staying to observe my work. It is interesting to note that they were able to pick up skills by this form of observation, in their own time, and as they needed.
Implementing and integrating visual arts

In rethinking my own instructional practices, I tried to enrich the cultural content of the curriculum. I began with the language arts program and an emphasis on the importance of family history. I asked students to write an autobiography that included aspects of family history. These studies in family history were expanded to include research into aspects of culture relevant to the student’s heritage, for example, to include faiths and religions and arts. The task also included an investigation of writers and literature, renowned personalities—such as Nobel Prize winners—and scientists, artists, musicians, and composers. At appropriate points in the mathematics program, I highlighted the significant contributions of Indian, African, and Muslim mathematicians.

Classroom discussions on different world religions included topics such as the founders and main personalities, the names of religious texts and places of worship. These discussions provided background information for further research and writing. To assist in disrupting the stereotypes students had experienced and to provide greater interest in these topics, I invited guest speakers from certain religious groups to make presentations. Their presentations included the five pillars of Islam, Hinduism, African diaspora religions, Judaism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Christianity, and they answered student questions. The classroom discussions that followed these presentations were all intended to clarify misconceptions that became evident from the students’ questions.

Throughout the year, I used religious observance days such as Christmas, Eid, Diwali, and Vaisakhi and cultural celebrations such as African Heritage Month, Asian Heritage Month, and Hispanic Heritage Month as opportunities to highlight the great accomplishments of writers, visual artists, musical artists, composers, political leaders, and scientists from a variety of cultural backgrounds. This process served to supplement the dearth, or complete lack, of information available to students through traditional textbooks.
I provided opportunities for discussion and for students to create digital presentations on each topic; this provided a meaningful context for the art assignments. At the same time, the assignments were designed to both challenge the students and also provide a high standard of expectation. Students were asked to write inquiry assignments such as biographies of artists, careers in visual arts, comparisons of art styles, reflections on their own art, and the role of the artist in society.

The following list describes the ways in which a culturally relevant, arts-infused curriculum provided a foundation of inclusion for students in special education.

- PowerPoint™ presentations on the works and lives of artists from various cultural backgrounds
- PowerPoint™ presentations on the art of different cultures, not identified by artist but by type, such as Islamic art, Mayan art, Asian mandalas
- Coordinating visual arts tasks in relation to the students’ homeroom work in mathematics or other subjects: for example, giving exercises in artistic balance when the topic of symmetry was introduced in math class; having students work on design patterns in tandem with their work in math on patterning—with a highlight on Islamic art, Tibetan and Native American mandalas, and tessellations by M.C. Escher at appropriate times
- Examining elements and principles of design in artwork from various cultures
- Student-written biographies of artists whose works the students examined intensively: for example, Sokari Douglas Camp, Ibrahim El Salahi, Amedeus Modigliani, Frida Kahlo, Cheri Samba
- Creating acrylic artworks inspired by the works of artists most closely related to the cultural heritage of the student
- Discussing the art of famous artists and the context that influenced their unique approaches to art: for example, the influences of African art evidenced in the works of Amedeus Modigliani, Pablo Picasso, and Henri Matisse

**LEARNING**

Data was collected through anecdotal observations and through students’ written and visual work. With their artwork adorning the halls of the school, students became recognized as having a lot to offer the school community. School staff, visitors from other schools, and parents repeatedly praised the student artists. This attention was a feather in the cap of students who had suffered the stigma of being different than students in the regular classrooms.

Concerning the transfer of skills, students improved in different aspects of the visual-spatial math strand. Students also developed in their ability to pay attention to detail. This can be attributed to the care required to reproduce a painting as accurately as possible. I even noticed that students have a far better sense of proportion than they are usually given credit for.

Giving students choice, providing them opportunities to discuss issues, providing support and guidance, teaching skills on a need-to-know basis, and designing curriculum by drawing on the wealth of cultural contributions—all of these helped to create space for students to engage with
ideas and to see themselves as valid contributors in the classroom and school community. As well, I’ve learned that the visual arts offer multiple entry points to the curriculum for students in special education classrooms.

This project forced me to question what is my purpose and my approach in whatever I am trying to accomplish as a teacher. For instance, I observed a South Asian female Grade 8 student choose an African painting as inspiration for her acrylic on canvas project. My first response was that “I thought that you were supposed to choose something related to your cultural heritage.” However, she was obviously very keen to use it, and I realized that just because a student is from a particular culture doesn’t mean that they want to choose a piece of art from that culture.

In other art activities, I have observed female Grade 7 and 8 students drawing self-portraits with straight hair, Manga-like, even though their racial heritage is African. This alerted me to how complex the influence of the dominant culture is on students’ identity formation. These observations led me to the following questions:

- Have attempts at multiculturalism been so successful that students’ cultural identities have become strong enough to withstand the influences of other cultural themes that have a greater public presence and impact?
- Is the malleability of cultural identity a symptom of cultural assimilation, even though cultural assimilation does not necessarily mean an internalization of the dominant culture?

**REFLECTION**

My experience with most of the students with special education needs has taught me that they have difficulties in completing written assignments and they approach them with a great degree of reluctance. This project helped me understand the importance using arts-based, culturally responsive instructional practices to engage students in a range of curriculum areas. This approach has made it possible to use inspiration as a significant catalyst for meaningful student work. In this way, I hope to share the realization that students are capable of so much more than they are given credit for. By using an engaging, inclusive curriculum, one in which students can see themselves represented, and also by having thorough discussion of the issues involved in completing a project, students can feel more comfortable and willing to undertake the written aspects of a task. As well, clearly defined expectations and rubrics have proven to be effective guidelines.

I hope that other teachers may see that it is possible to blend all aspects of cultural diversity within the school curriculum and, in the process, make the curriculum more responsive to the needs of the students.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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BIO

Hussan Ali earned a BA in economics and political science at the University of Toronto and taught business courses at George Brown College from 1985 to 1995. He has been teaching in the Toronto District School Board since 1997, and he is a teacher in the Learning Disabilities Intensive Support Program.

Beverly Caswell is the director of the Robertson Program for Inquiry-based Teaching in Mathematics and Science at the Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study, OISE, University of Toronto. An associate member of OISE’s Centre for Urban Schooling and a founding coordinator of OISE’s Inner City Option, Bev was teacher liaison for the Inclusive Schools project at Carleton Village Public School.
Beverly Caswell and Grace LaRocque

Flemington Public School’s first Multicultural Math Night resulted from a collaborative inquiry project involving teachers, students, administration, teacher candidates, and a university researcher. The Grade 4 and 5 students at the school took leadership roles in designing and implementing math activities and showcasing their mathematical understanding at a math night event for parents and families. The event was supported by the Robertson Program for Inquiry-Based Teaching in Mathematics and Science1 and a team of OISE teacher candidates from the Inner City Option and from the MA program of Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study. This student-run event drew a large crowd of parents, caregivers, children, family members, and community representatives. It revealed students’ mathematical understanding through a series of inquiry-based and culturally relevant math lessons and activities that had been implemented in the Grade 4 and 5 classrooms during the weeks leading up to the event. Our goal was to create a public event highlighting inquiry-based teaching to honour cultural contributions in math and to empower students to become “doers of mathematics” (Nasir, 2007, p. 132).

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1 An innovative program housed at the Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study, OISE, University of Toronto
Vice-principal LaRoque invited OISE liaison Caswell to collaborate with Flemington’s math team in their planning for an inquiry-based math night for the school. During the initial lunch hour meeting, members of the math team determined the main goals of the project: (a) to build deeper connections with the community through hosting an evening numeracy event for families, (b) to learn how to bring a culturally relevant perspective to their math teaching, and (c) to design curriculum to honour the many influences from Africa and Asia that represented the ethnic backgrounds of the majority of students at Flemington. During the meeting we discussed ways to tap into the mathematical and cultural knowledge parents bring and to celebrate those contributions. We wanted the students to become aware of the contributions of their background in the development of mathematical concepts and number systems, and to be empowered to see mathematics not simply as what is presented in textbooks but as an important tool to understand our world.

During the second math team meeting, Caswell shared examples of culturally relevant math activities related to a variety of non-Western thinkers who have made valuable contributions to the field of mathematics. The math team became very interested in developing five of these examples into inquiry-based activities to share with the students at the school.

At this meeting three main ideas emerged: (a) to create a math night that honoured cultural contributions to math, (b) to create a math night run by students, and (c) to prepare students for math night by creating inquiry-based learning environments that gave them opportunities to learn about number systems and mathematical contributions of non-Western thinkers in mathematics and that reflected some of the cultural or linguistic knowledge that students bring to school.

As Gutiérrez (2012) aptly puts it, “For most mathematics educators, identity issues might include understanding mathematics as a cultural practice in ways that might further develop the appreciation of one’s ‘roots’” (p. 19).

**PROCESS**

In the weeks leading up to the math night event, Caswell worked with teachers and children during six days at the school to introduce culturally relevant pedagogy and inquiry-based teaching that highlighted non-Western mathematical ideas and number systems. Approximately 125 Grade 4 and 5 students participated in the project, along with their classroom teachers. Each classroom received six visits of approximately 1.5 hours. See Table 1 for dates of visits and lesson topics. A brief overview of each of the lessons follows.

**Soroban or Japanese abacus**

This session began with children discussing their experiences using calculators and sharing the ways calculators are used in school and society. Students were then shown a soroban (Japanese abacus) and asked what they thought it might be. Students were amazed to find that the soroban is used as a calculator, and they were curious to learn how this was possible. The students then created their own
popsicle-stick sorobans and were shown how to use the abacus to represent numbers and how to perform simple addition and subtraction calculations.

**Table 1. Classroom Visits and Lesson Topics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date of visit</th>
<th>Topic of lesson</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>March 22nd</td>
<td>The soroban or Japanese abacus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 29th</td>
<td>Al-Khwarizmi, patterning, and algebra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 5th</td>
<td>Muhammad Yunus, microcredit, and the Grameen Bank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 12th</td>
<td>Number systems from around the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 19th</td>
<td>Hypatia and the astrolabe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 28th</td>
<td>Group meetings to finalize activities for sessions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6 visits @ 1.5 hours/classroom = 9 hours/classroom X 5 classrooms = 30 visits x 1.5 hours = 45 hours of observation and teaching

**Al-Khwarizmi, patterning, and algebra**

Students were introduced to the life of al-Khwarizmi, the Persian mathematician (780 CE) who made important contributions to the study of algebra. After a brief interactive PowerPoint™ presentation highlighting information on the contributions of this scholar, students participated in an algebraic thinking game and subsequent activities (based on the work of Moss & McNab, 2011; Moss & Beatty, 2006); students inserted a number into an input slot (e.g., 4) on a poster board Function Machine and the teacher revealed an output number, which appeared through an output slot (e.g., 8). Students were shown other numbers—input of 6, output of 12; input of 2, output of 4—then were asked to guess the rule. Students very quickly and correctly concluded that the output number was equal to the input number times two. Students then built these equations geometrically using square tiles and position cards. Subsequently, students were able to create input-output equations involving composite functions (e.g., output = input x 3 + 7) and represent these numerically and geometrically. Students then created their own “al-Khwarizmi Transformation Machine” in preparation for math night.
Hypatia of Alexandria

Storytelling was used to introduce students to the life of Hypatia, a brilliant mathematician, astronomer, and philosopher born in 370 in Alexandria, Egypt. According to stories about this fascinating woman, she held political power in the city and drove her own chariot. It is said that one of her many accomplishments was that she invented or improved the astrolabe, an instrument astronomers and navigators used to locate and predict the position of the sun, moon, planets, and stars. Students then created a version of Hypatia’s astrolabe out of cardstock to measure unknown heights using angles.

Muhammad Yunus, microcredit, and the Grameen Bank

In this session, Bogert and Caswell created a short skit introducing the difference between traditional bank loans and microcredit. They highlighted the work of Bangladeshi economist and founder of the Grameen Bank, Muhammad Yunus, who developed a system of microcredit, microfinance, and microbanking that offers small loans to people who don’t qualify for traditional bank loans. Students also heard excerpts from A Basket of Bangles (Howard & Noll, 2002), which describes the microcredit process for a group of women in Bangladesh in the development of a small business. A game was designed using the currency of Bangladesh, the taka, for students to learn about loans, interest rates, and how a small business works.

Number systems from around the world

Students were introduced to a variety of number systems—using picture books, stories, and games—and compared them with our base 10 system. Students became fascinated with Yoruba numbers that have a base 20 system. Students used pipe cleaners to string sets of 20 small beads and learned the unique names for numbers in the Yoruba system. They then created mathematical word problems to be solved. For example, let’s say you want to buy something that costs $55. How many sets of 20 do you need? How many beads will you need to take away? The children demonstrated numerical flexibility in using subtraction to express numbers: $55 = (3 \times 20) – 5$.

They were also fascinated with the Ishango bone, a counting tool purportedly more than 20,000 years old and found on the border of Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Students used clay to recreate the Ishango bone (10 cm in length) for use as a counting and measuring tool. Much math talk ensued as students shared their mathematical thinking during the design process. Students also had opportunity to explore an ancient Babylonian number system, finding that the numerals in this base 60 system could be represented through the use of only two symbols. (See Figure 1.)
Multicultural Math Night

There were three parts to the Multicultural Math Night. As families arrived at the school, they received a program and a family math challenge—a multi-step number pattern based on a number system from around the world—for a chance to win one of the door prizes. Then they gathered in the gymnasium to view a slideshow highlighting the work of the children and a brief overview of “great thinkers” they would learn about during the evening. Next, families attended the student-led sessions. (See Figure 2.)

Figure 2. Multicultural Math Night activities and program

Credit: photos by Beverly Caswell

Credit: photos by Sarah Higgins
LEARNING

Through this project we witnessed a successful model for designing a student-led math night. Students not only had a one-night special event but also had weekly interactions with mentors and big ideas in mathematics using a culturally relevant, inquiry-based approach. They also learned how to design an event to make the mathematics come to life for other students. They learned that their ancestors had made significant contributions to the development of mathematical ideas and inventions that are important today, and they seemed honoured by that information. This in turn provided motivation for them to inquire further into mathematical concepts and historical cultural contexts.

Students demonstrate numeracy skills

The public event gave the student leaders opportunity and motivation to develop and display computational fluency. For example, when we forgot to bring calculators for the input-output game at the algebra session, students rose to the occasion and began to do mental math to keep the game moving. They demonstrated competence with complex equations. For example, audience members would offer a series of input numbers between 0 and 9, and the students would perform a transformation by using a “secret” rule such as times 3 plus 7 to then reveal an output number to the audience; i.e., for an input of 3, an output of 16 would be revealed. On the following day when students reflected on the situation, they spoke about not knowing that they were “this good at math.” One Grade 4 student summed up her experience by saying, “It helped me learn more about multiplication and everything.”

In the Yoruba number system activity, we observed young children demonstrate a flexibility in number sense as they focused on counting precisely 20 beads to put on the pipe cleaner, then spontaneously rearrange the beads into groups of 10 or 5. Griffin (2005) refers to young children’s ability to compose and decompose numbers as a hallmark of developing number sense. During the math night a Grade 1 student offered the following math problem to a parent: “There are five people [moves 5 beads to one end of pipe cleaner]. Two people didn’t want to come. So you subtract 2. And you have 3 left.” (See Figure 3.)

Barwell (2011) describes the importance of supporting students to make sense of word problems, which are often challenging for students. The ease with which students formulated spontaneous word problems and discussed specific parts of the problem demonstrate that if the activity makes sense to students and they are given the opportunity to mathematize familiar contexts, it increases their chance of developing an understanding of how to read and solve mathematical word problems such as those given on standardized tests.

During the abacus learning activity, we observed students demonstrating an understanding of place value and an ability to perform addition and subtraction skills.
In the Grameen Bank session, the Grade 4 and 5 students demonstrated a variety of numeracy skills. They clearly articulated how an interest rate of 20 percent on 2000 taka would translate into repaying an extra 400 taka on a 2000 taka loan; they were able to skillfully count money and provide change for others; and they demonstrated some vocabulary of financial literacy through a playful skit they developed to describe the Grameen Bank. One student reflected on the experience: “Running the Grameen Bank was fun because I was like, Bro it’s OK, you don’t need collateral— we can give you a loan, but you need to pay us back so that’s fair to people who don’t have money.”

Parents contribute cultural knowledge

One of Cochran-Smith’s (2004) six principles of teaching for social justice is to build on the cultural and linguistic knowledge of students and families. It was interesting to observe how the evening’s activities sparked parents to share their linguistic and cultural knowledge as well as their mathematical knowledge. We saw examples of how culturally relevant pedagogy could build bridges to people’s lived experiences. For instance, during the slideshow in the gymnasium one of the parents volunteered to teach the audience how to read the title of al-Khwarizmi’s book in Arabic—al-Kitab al-mukhtasar fi hisab al-jabr wa’l-muqabala1—highlighting the word al-jabr from which the word algebra is derived.

Empowering students to be numeracy leaders through a multicultural perspective makes a powerful statement to parents. Many students commented on the pride shown by their families. The following

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1 “The Compendious Book on Calculation by Completion and Balancing”
comment by a Grade 5 student sums up this sentiment: “I felt like I did a good job, because when I finished explaining what collateral was to everyone in the room, my mom was smiling at me and clapping at the same time.” Another student spoke about how the event forged a math connection between her and her father: “My dad came and he taught me about algebra and stuff afterwards. When you were talking about al-Khwarizmi and after I told him, my dad got interested, and then he started to tell me what he learned about in school. Like how \( x \) or any letter is always a specific number.”

In the weeks following the event, parents came to the school administration asking if there could be more of this kind of presentation at the school. Their cultural and linguistic backgrounds were valued and connected to something as academically significant and important as mathematics and demonstrated recognition and affirmation of parents’ cultural contributions. Many mothers and fathers shared information with the teachers about other important mathematicians and scientists from their countries of origin.

During the math night, many parents were very interested in the idea of microfinance and the work of Muhammad Yunus of the Grameen Bank. Parents inquired about whether there were such microfinance programs in Canada. From this community interest, we collaborated with community agencies to create a microfinance information session for parents and caregivers at Flemington Public School.

**REFLECTION**

Math is a gatekeeper subject and a passport for opportunities in society. Flemington parents understand the importance of developing a strong foundation of numeracy. The significance of relating numeracy to a person’s cultural background was evident and an empowering feature of the project. The event gave students opportunities to take up the challenges they were presented with and to see themselves as doers of mathematics. Often math is seen simply a series of tasks in a textbook, but throughout the centuries in every culture around the world, people have developed and used mathematics to try to understand their world. This project tried to honour some of these contributions, and by doing so, a community-building experience came into being.
REFERENCES


For more details on the lessons described in this paper, please see the Robertson Program website at http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/robertson

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BIOS

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Incorporating Social Justice Issues in the Curriculum: From Literature to Action

Ifetayo Fleary
in collaboration with Mini Dindayal

The emergence of social justice issues in societies around the world has been a major driving force to encourage change for humanity. Issues surrounding racism, discrimination, sexism, poverty, and child labour are just a few of the social injustices. I believe it is important for students, including young students, to be aware of social justice and world issues, to see their roles as citizens and activists for change, and to experience and develop agency. As a result, children may often look to see how adults respond to these situations, and this gives children the opportunity to question and think critically about themselves and their world and to have conversations about social justice issues.

From an early age, children often have a strong sense of fairness and injustice. They begin to question and look for reasons for people’s actions, especially towards one another. They also begin to be aware of social and racial injustices, differences, and inequalities. According to the web resource, Talking about Race with K-5: Honoring Teachable Race Moments in Your Classroom¹, children “see the segregation of peers in the lunchroom and playground, they see the segregation of the schools around them, and they watch cultural stereotypes acted out on television.” Often they look to how adults deal with and respond to these situations. Giving children the opportunity to question and have conversations about social justice issues helps them think critically about themselves and their world.

¹ http://issuu.com/bordercrossers/docs/talking_about_race_with_k-5
The questions and concerns raised by students in my class prompted me to focus this project on ways to integrate social justice themes and issues into the curriculum. A necessary part of social action involves investigating social justice issues in literature as part of the curriculum, and with the larger goal of creating a more just and peaceful world. Scholars agree that teaching children should involve more than transmitting the basic skills of knowledge in language and math; it should include developing an awareness about the world and the steps that can be taken to promote change. James Banks (1991) refers to this as multicultural literacy, an important component in teaching social justice and action.

Multicultural literacy consists of the skills and abilities to identify the creators of knowledge and their interests, to uncover the assumptions of knowledge, to view knowledge from diverse ethnic and cultural perspectives, and to use knowledge to guide action that will create a humane and just world. When we teach students how to critique the injustice in the world, we need to help them formulate possibilities for action to change the world and make it more democratic and just. Critique without hope may leave students disillusioned and lacking in agency (Banks, 2004, p. 291).

This project focused on the reasons for and benefits of integrating social justice issues into the curriculum. It also addressed how students are motivated to become active agents of change. I had in mind the following questions:

➤ How would students respond to the social justice issues that plague society today?
➤ How could I integrate aspects of the curriculum to make learning and engagement more meaningful?
➤ How could I bring awareness regarding certain issues without seeming biased?
➤ What steps would I need to take to guide students to action?

At the onset, introducing social justice issues involved examining how local and world issues affect their lives. The purpose was to allow students to start with issues of local interest and then expand to a broader, international scope by helping them make connections related to morality, injustice, equality, and fairness. The overall project goal was for my students to be able to see themselves as agents of change even at a young age. At the same time, I recognized the need to enhance their engagement and knowledge about their surroundings and increase their academic achievement in the various subject areas.

**PROCESS**

The first stage of the project began during a language focus on point-of-view writing. Students were encouraged to bring a voice to their writing that was not personally their own. After students expressed their feelings about a particular character’s situation, a series of discussions began about the character’s lifestyle, upbringing, and issues they faced.
The selection of literature was critical. I intentionally selected the following texts because they provided the foundation for the type of discussion and learning that I wanted to take place in my classroom: *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *Wanting Mor*, *The Other Side*, *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, *If a Bus Could Talk: The Story of Rosa Parks*, *Iqbal*, *Wings*, *Fly Away Home*, and *Wilma Unlimited*. During this project, students began to ask questions and had comments about what was happening to the main characters in these stories and why.

First, I introduced *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Students learned that Anne Frank expressed her personal feelings about her situation in her diary. I encouraged them to put themselves in her shoes, especially when she was faced with injustice and racism. I asked them to bring to life how they would feel if they experienced the same issues that Anne did. Through this process, students began to question the injustice of the time and the unfairness that many of the Jewish people experienced. The following are some of the questions my students asked about the text:

"Anne Frank was just a little girl, I don’t understand why they treated her that way?"

"Why weren’t the girls allowed to do the same things as boys?"

"I don’t understand why people were being so mean to each other?"

As student engagement increased through class and group discussions, I introduced other sources of literature. And when the students questioned more about the themes in the stories, they began to think about current conditions around the world and where they live. They started to develop an interest in human rights issues and why some of these human rights were being violated. Through the literature, students became aware of injustices and were inspired to consider what they could do to make a change, and they researched some conditions happening here and abroad in order to broaden the scope of the issues being discussed.

The novel, *Wanting Mor*, by Rukshana Khan inspired the students to make a difference in the world. The story itself is based upon the difficult life of a young girl who ends up in an orphanage after her mother dies and her father abandons her. The students were empathetic toward the situation of this character, who was about their own age. They wanted to contact an all-girls orphanage in Kabul, Afghanistan, and perhaps become pen pals with some of the girls there. As a persuasive writing activity, they wrote letters to the people of Kabul to convince them to adopt this young girl who lived in an orphanage. They also wanted to make posters that would bring awareness to various human rights issues around the world. I saw that students really did take an interest in the conditions that affected young people their age, and I realized how children can play an important role by wanting to do something about injustices that exist. The readings and discussions led students to research the effects of war on children, a community, and even the environment.

It was my goal throughout this project to work in Stage 4, the social action approach, of the James Banks model for students to make decisions on important social issues and participate in actions to solve them. (See Appendix, pp. 184–185). This is the stage where students become advocates for social justice, exemplified by their letter writing when they tried to convince people in Kabul to help
the children who were affected by war. Through using just one text, the reading, writing, and media literacy expectations were met, and at the same time a social justice theme was integrated and students were motivated to actively strive to make a change in the world.

These actions were inspired by their reading of Wanting Mor, but getting to this stage was nurtured by exposing students to other reading materials such as The Diary of Anne Frank, The Story of Rosa Parks, and Iqbal. This exposure, through various forms of literature, set the stage for the students to want to take social action. For example, while they were learning about the main character in Iqbal, I wanted students to realize that children their age and living in a completely different social context could make a difference.

**LEARNING**

Data were collected through students’ written responses and the anecdotal notes I made during class discussions. Some of the key findings became evident in the discussions and students’ insightful responses to what they were reading.

I noticed that teaching and learning went through a variety of stages during the project. The first stage of student engagement began when students were given the opportunity to put themselves in the shoes of the characters they read about. As a result, they began to question their own situations. During the point-of-view segment, students expressed how beneficial it was to be able to describe from their own perspective the life and experiences of children their age. Putting themselves in the shoes of the characters was an eye-opening experience for them, and on this basis I measured the progress toward my teaching goal.

Upon hearing the characters’ life stories in various types of literature, students were interested in their condition. They began to see how privileged they were to be afforded the opportunity to receive an education and have the basic needs that many people take for granted. For example, when reading Iqbal, students were particularly disturbed by the fact that children their age were often working in deplorable conditions instead of learning to read, write, and engage in other learning opportunities. They began to question their current predicaments and situations and contrast this with children their age who were not afforded the same opportunities. The characters portrayed were not victims, but incredible children, teens, and adults who accomplished great feats fighting against unjust systems. After reading stories that dealt with issues of racism, sexism, prejudice, segregation, and poverty, students began to relate their own life experiences to the characters. And the texts they read helped them connect not only to their own life experiences but to others around the world.

Students began to take more interest in literacy activities because many of the reading materials were related to real-life situations. On their own, some students chose to read materials that had a social justice theme or connection. After developing many questions around social justice, the students became more interested in having discussions about current issues in the world. They desired to learn more about issues around poverty, homelessness, and child labour, and they sought resources that might answer the questions they had. This was a stage of discovery as students took what they
learned in the literature and related it to their own experience of what they heard from people around them and in the media. They sought information that would further inform their learning. They researched mostly through the Internet and also from books related to various topics of discussion.

Building on their personal experiences, students examined ways people regarded and treated other people in the world. Once students began to question and take an interest in not only the characters in the stories but also the situations in their own lives, they began to want to do something about current conditions in the world. Through the use of the James Banks model to expose students to different attitudes and perceptions, students began to question, think critically, and decide what they could do to make a change. At first the focus of their conversations was to bring awareness to children their age about some of the injustices in the world. This was the stage where they desired to take social action by organizing different events to let other students in the school know what was happening to children their age and some of the injustices they face. This corresponds to Stage 4 of the James Banks model in which students are allowed “to make decisions on important social issues and take actions to help solve them” (Toronto District School Board, 2006).

When the action stage began, students wondered what they could do to help children that were not afforded the same basic needs and privileges as they were. They were interested in contacting various organizations who were directly involved in assisting those who were underprivileged. They also wanted to develop contacts with children abroad to learn more about them. They sought to make a change.

By teaching social justice issues through the curriculum, I saw the impact children can have when they become aware and sensitive to issues that directly or indirectly affect their lives. Seeing how many of the students became engaged in the process of learning about injustice made me realize that they really do take an interest in what happens in the world. They had an impact on my thinking as I continued with the project, and they also had an impact on their peers through an increasing number of discussions about issues around the world.

Over time I noticed students began to take responsibility for their learning and became actively engaged in the process of promoting human rights. They shared with their peers the many things they learned in class. They began to realize that bringing awareness about injustices locally and around the world would inspire others to make a change. During an awards assembly, some students got together and created a PowerPoint™ presentation concerning the injustices of child labour, and they encouraged students in the school to recognize that this is a serious issue.

I faced challenges in trying to create an environment for all students to take risks and share their thoughts, beliefs, and opinions. I had to create a curriculum that ensured all students’ opinions would be heard and allowed them to develop skills to articulate their thoughts without being offensive or demeaning to anyone. Often it was difficult for me to leave out my own biases and opinions. Nevertheless, it was important to allow students to direct their own discussions while I facilitated their learning. To conclude, it is important to realize that at the heart of teaching social justice issues is the opportunity to transform the entire world, the world which can literally be changed through the inspiration of one child.
REFLECTION

This project has had a profound impact on me both as a teacher and person. I too became more sensitive to inequalities and injustices both locally and abroad; this speaks to the fact that teaching is a two-way process.

I highly recommend integrating the teaching of social justice issues into the curriculum from the primary to the junior grades. Throughout my experience I found that many students do take an interest in things that happen beyond the classroom walls. They just need to be exposed to what is happening in the world and be encouraged to question and then take action to make a difference.

It is very important that teachers take advantage of “teachable moments” and use these opportunities to have open and explicit conversations and respond to questions students often wonder about. I also recommend teachers use both fiction and non-fiction readings—such as articles on Rosa Parks and picture books related to the time period (1954)—that allow students not only to see themselves but also to relate to the characters’ lives and empathize with their situations. Text selection is critical because students need to relate to the topics in the books so they can make connections to their lives, and this makes the curriculum more engaging. (See Figure 1 for a list of suggested books.) When students can see themselves in the life of a character or in a situation, they will likely want to learn more about the character. They will realize they do not live in a “bubble” and their action or inaction does affect others.

Figure 1. Suggested books

| Rukhsana, K. (2009). Wanting Mor: Toronto: Groundwood Books |

Also, I highly recommend using the James Banks model as a guide for teaching social justice through the curriculum. (See Appendix, pp. 184–185.) It allows educators to motivate students toward social action and also encourages students to think critically around issues related to equity and diversity. It not only speaks to the importance of teaching social justice but also takes students that extra step toward making a difference. Taking responsibility for their learning is simply the prerequisite for developing awareness and taking action.
My next steps will be to continually find ways to enrich the curriculum by using real-life experiences and to incorporate social justice for students in younger grades. At the heart of teaching social justice issues is the opportunity to transform the entire world, the world which can literally be changed through the inspiration of one child. Through this project my students were able to see themselves as agents of change; they became excited about learning and wanting to do things for others, not just for themselves. They were able to recognize that there are people who face injustices both locally and abroad, and they do have the power to make a difference.

**REFERENCES**


Banks, J. (Summer, 2004). The Educational Forum, 68, 291


**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to acknowledge the Grade 5 and 6 students who offered me one of the best years of my teaching career. Not only did they have enthusiasm and willingness to become sensitive to moral issues but also they wanted to be an inspiration to others by transforming what they learned into something powerful.

**BIO**

Ifetayo Fleary is a teacher with the Toronto District School Board who has worked in both primary and junior divisions, including special education for the past six years. She is currently teaching at Grey Owl Junior Public School.

Mini Dindayal received her BEd from York University. During the Inclusive Schools project, she was a seconded OISE instructor from the Toronto District School Board, where she is a leader in Early Years learning, math education, and the Model Schools projects.
### Appendix

**JAMES BANKS CONTINUUM**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DIMENSIONS</th>
<th>CONTRIBUTIONS APPROACH (Stage 1)</th>
<th>ADDITIVE APPROACH (Stage 2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>CONTENT INTEGRATION</strong></td>
<td>• Use of examples, data, information</td>
<td>• uses a few discrete examples, data and information from a limited range of sources to contribute to the structure of the curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Method of integration</td>
<td>• integrates respect for diversity in a minimal way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>KNOWLEDGE CONSTRUCTION PROCESS</strong></td>
<td>• Cultural assumptions, frames of reference, perspectives and biases</td>
<td>• integrates respect for diversity to help students recognize differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PREJUDICE REDUCTION</strong></td>
<td>• Attitudes and perceptions</td>
<td>• teaches that knowledge comes from a diversity of perspectives/sources, but curriculum is shaped by a predominantly western viewpoint</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Interventions and strategies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>EQUITY PEDAGOGY</strong></td>
<td>• Techniques and methods</td>
<td>• demonstrates an acknowledgement of democratic values, but generally denies the existence of injustice, oppression, exploitation and discrimination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Instructional style</td>
<td>• intervenes in a responsive manner to help students develop positive attitudes/values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>EMPOWERING SCHOOL CULTURE</strong></td>
<td>• Expectations for student achievement</td>
<td>• adopts some techniques and methods to facilitate academic achievement of all types of learners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• School-wide advocacy for social justice</td>
<td>• teaches in a somewhat student-centred classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• assumes student can build on learning but sets some limits; assumes student can apply learning in defined circumstances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• supports, in a moderate manner; staff and students who advocate for social justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRANSFORMATION APPROACH (Stage 3)</td>
<td>SOCIAL ACTION APPROACH (Stage 4)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• uses many and varied examples, data and information from a wide range of sources to change/transform/shape the structure of the curriculum</td>
<td>• uses many and varied examples, data and information from a wide range of sources to extend the structure of the curriculum beyond the classroom and into the realm of social action</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• integrates respect for diversity to help students learn</td>
<td>• integrates respect for diversity to help students become socially active and critically minded citizens</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• teaches that knowledge comes from a variety of perspectives/sources and encourages perspectives other than the “norm”</td>
<td>• teaches that knowledge reflects the social, cultural power positions of people within society, and that our response is shaped by our own “ranking” within that hierarchical power structure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• demonstrates a commitment to democratic values and to acting against injustice, oppression, exploitation and discrimination</td>
<td>• demonstrates and models democratic values, and acts against injustice, oppression, exploitation and discrimination</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• intervenes with strategies in a proactive manner to help students develop positive attitudes and values</td>
<td>• intervenes with strategies in a proactive manner to help students develop positive attitudes and values</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• adopts many techniques and methods to facilitate academic achievement for all types of learners</td>
<td>• adopts many and varied techniques and methods to facilitate academic achievement for all types of learners</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• teaches in an interactive student-centred and community-based classroom</td>
<td>• teaches in an interactive and evolving student-centred and community-based classroom</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• assumes student can build on learning and can apply learning with intelligence</td>
<td>• assumes student can and will build on learning and has potential to achieve self-actualization and social involvement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• supports, in a consistent manner, staff and students who advocate for a school for social justice</td>
<td>• supports, in an active manner, staff and students who advocate for a school for social justice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This model “rubric” is for educators to use for personal reflection or classroom and school planning. The educator includes classroom teachers, administrators, support staff, parents, and community members.

Adapted by the Toronto District School Board from the following sources:


Reprinted with permission.
**Videos, Films, and DVDs**

**Good Morning Miss Tolliver**, R. Neill (Director), Foundation for Advancements in Science and Education (FASE), 1994  
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NZA_ZP-s3H  
In this video set in a New York City junior high school, Kay Tolliver models incredible energy and optimism as a teacher. She sets high standards and sees endless possibilities for students.

**The Trotsky**, J. Tierney (Director), K. Tierney (Producer), 2009  
A young high school student wants to organize his school to make it more responsive, democratic, and equitable for all students.

**Mela’s Lunch**, S. Varughese (Director), National Film Board (NFB), 2009  
http://www.nfb.ca/film/melas_lunch/  
This video acted by children concerns how a young girl is bullied and teased about wearing her traditional dress and eating her traditional cultural food; it shows the pressure to conform to mainstream customs. The video encourages discussion about friendship and what it means.

**For Angela*/** Pour Angela*, N. Trites Botkin and D. Prouty (Directors), NFB, 1993/1994  
http://www.nfb.ca/search?q=For+Angela  
This excellent video, in either English or French, shows the devastating impact of racism stereotypes on an aboriginal child and her mother.

**Celine Goes to Mali**/* Celine au Mali*, M. Crouillère (Director), NFB, 1991  
http://www.onf.ca/recherche?q=Celine+au+Mali  
This video helps students understand how cultural practices develop in a very different context (Mali, Africa), and develops appreciation for different cultures and cultural practices.

**Where the Spirit Lives**, B. Pittman (Director), H. Haldane (Producer), 1989  
http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0103244/  
This TV movie on residential schools provides excellent discussion on indoctrination, colonization, and cultural genocide.

**United**, Youth for Human Rights International (Producer)  
http://www.youthforhumanrights.org/freeinfo.html  
A music video directed by a 19-year-old filmmaker and produced by kids provides a powerful anti-bullying message. It is part of the Youth for Human Rights information kit for educators, which also includes a booklet called What are Human Rights?; a DVD featuring Making Human Rights a Reality; and the short award-winning educational film, The Story of Human Rights.
Deepening Inclusive and Community-Engaged Education

http://www.amazon.ca/Paper-Clips-Sous-titres-fran%C3%A7ais-David/dp/B000CMNJF4/ref=sr_1_1/188-3373232-4432736?ie=UTF8&qid=1379429633&sr=8-1&keywords=paper+clips+dvd
This video shows how a Tennessee middle school sought to develop a program to teach diversity; its lessons concern prejudice and intolerance and how the students grew in their understanding of racism.

**To This Day: Porkchop**, S. Koyczan, 2013
This animated spoken word video provides a powerful, anti-bullying message with a focus on inclusion and respect for difference.

**Safe@School: Equity and Inclusive Education**, Ontario Teachers’ Federation, 2012
http://safeatschool.ca/index.php?q=resources/resources-on-equity-and-inclusion
This kit has been designed to help educators present materials on diversity and social justice issues. This free, excellent resource includes posters, two DVDs, and two guides: Promoting Equity and Inclusive Education in Schools and Creating Safe Schools: A Bullying Prevention Guide for Teachers. (Also available: Multimedia Toolkit for Parents entitled “We All Belong.”)

**BOOKS AND ARTICLES**

The intention of this anthology of poems is to help young people become engaged in moving toward a compassionate understanding of others.

This article is a theoretical and practical resource for thinking about how to teach music for social justice; it includes excellent ideas for classroom projects.

This book offers an extensive collection of readings and source material on critical global issues. It provides a blend of theory and practice and is targeted for pre-service and in-service teachers.

This book provides a range of literacy and drama strategies that address identity, community, equity, and inclusion.
This article outlines a variety of literacy and arts-based strategies that were used to investigate issues of power, race, inclusion, and exclusion in a TDSB Grade 3 classroom.

Challenging Class Bias Grades 7–12, Equity Department, TDSB, 2005
A resource for intermediate and senior teachers, this publication provides activities, themes, and concepts to incorporate discussions of class bias and poverty into the curriculum.

This book describes the main ideas behind the practices of restorative justice. According to the authors the concept originated with the Maori of New Zealand, but it is also part of many aboriginal cultures.

This book examines “peacemaker justice,” a practice based on traditional teachings of aboriginal communities in Canada, from Yukon to Cape Breton. It reveals how these communities move from pain and suffering to the promise of individual, family, and community healing.

Social Justice Begins With Me, Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario (ETFO)
This ETFO literature-based resource kit is designed for Early Years to Grade 8 and is organized using 10 themes: Self-Esteem, Sharing Our Lives, Peace, Building Supportive Communities, Rights of the Child, Caring Hands, Untie the Knots of Prejudice, Local and Global Citizenship, True Worth and Beauty, and Circles and Cycles.

More Than a Play, Elementary Teachers Association of Ontario, 2010
Written for students ages 11 through 15, this collection of nine short scripts centres on themes of social justice, diversity, and equity (e.g., classism, ableism, homophobia). The scripts are by Canadian playwrights and are intended for students to explore dramatically.

PICTURE BOOKS

The Name Jar, Y. Choi, Random House, 2001
Unhei moves from Korea to the United States, and when she arrives at school, her new classmates help her decide what her name should be.

A mother tells her story about a young boy who loves to dress up in a princess tiara and crown. The book asks such questions as, If you see a Princess Boy… Will you laugh at him? Will you like him for who he is?

The Stamp Collector, Jennifer Lanthier and Francois Thisdale (Illustrator), Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2012
One boy loves stamps. One boy loves words. The two boys grow into men separated by background, position, and cell bars. The power of story connects and transforms their lives.
Let’s Talk about Race, J. Lester and K. Barbour (Illustrator), HarperCollins, 2005
This book is highly recommended as a springboard for discussions about differences.

My Name is Bilal, A. Mobin-Uddin and B. Kiwak (Illustrator), Boyds Mill Press, 2005
Bilal and his sister transfer to a school where they are the only Muslims, and they must learn how to fit in while staying true to their heritage and beliefs.

My Name is Yoon, H. Recorvits and G. Swiatkowska (Illustrator), Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003
A young Korean girl, who dislikes her name as written in English, feels uncomfortable in her new school and new country.

Each Kindness, J. Woodson and E.B. Lewis (Illustrator), Penguin Young Readers, 2012
When Ms Albert teaches her students a lesson on kindness, a young girl realizes that she and her friends have been wrong in making fun of a new student’s shabby clothes.

Freedom Summer, D. Wiles and J. Lagarrigue (Illustrator), Heryin Books, 2006
The issue of black and white people sharing space is explored in a story about a swimming pool being covered in.

Not My Fault, L. Kristiansson and D. Stenberg (Illustrator), Heryin Books, 2006
This powerful book about bullying is taken to a global level; it begins with the issue at school and extends to images of starvation, war, pollution. It also questions the role of the bystander.

This book tells a migrant’s story through a series of images that seem to come from a long forgotten time. Strong themes of diversity, migration, power, conflict, oppression, and resistance are creatively explored.

Written in poetic form and with beautiful artwork, this book tells the story of a little girl in Afghanistan who dreams of peace.

This is K’Naan’s personal account of his life as a refugee in a challenging urban setting. His words and music allowed him to survive and thrive in his new homeland.

Don’t Laugh at Me, S. Seskin, A. Shamblin, and G.Dibley (Illustrator), Tricycle Press, 2002
This picture book, with an accompanying CD, has strong imagery and a strong message about respect for diversity and difference.

The Woman Who Outshone the Sun, A.C. Martinez, Children’s Book Press, 1997
This powerful legend is about the consequences of lack of tolerance and respect for difference. The text is in both English and Spanish.


**NOVELS FOR AGES 11 TO 14**

The refugee experience is seen through the eyes of Kek who comes as a young boy to America from Africa. Kek's story is beautifully told in free verse.

*Elijah of Buxton*, C.P. Curtis, Scholastic Canada, 2007
Eleven-year old Elijah is the first child born into freedom in Buxton, Ontario, a settlement of runaway slaves. (See also *The Mighty Miss Malone* by the same author.)

To represent all students who have been called names, a group of students who do not fit in at their small-town middle school create a third party for the student council elections.

Ha and her family are forced to flee from Saigon, and they board a ship headed toward a more hopeful life.

Cole Matthews is once again in trouble, and when he's given the choice between going to prison and receiving Native American Circle Justice, he chooses the latter.

Accused of murder, and while living in jail, 16-year-old Steve Harmon creates a movie of his life.

Born with a facial deformity, August Pullman was forced to be home-schooled. In this story, he is finally going to be enrolled in the local school, where he hopes to fit in and be considered “normal.”

*The Crazy Man*, P. Porter, Groundwood Books, 2005
Emaline loses her father, her dog, and her health because of a terrible Prairie farm accident. Healing comes through her friendship with her new friend known as “Crazy Man.” This novel has won of a number of children’s literature awards.

*Mr. Stink*, D. Walliams and Q. Blake (Illustrator), HarperCollins, 2009
A homeless man arrives in town and is greeted by Chloe who considers herself the loneliest girl in the world. Chloe offers Mr Stink a place to stay in her home, but this act of kindness does not fit with Chloe’s mother’s plans to run for council. (See also *The Boy in the Dress* by the same author.)

*Shattered*, E. Walters, Puffin Canada, 2006
To pass his social studies course, 15-year-old Ian must complete community volunteer service. When he ends up in a soup kitchen for the homeless, he meets a former soldier from the Canadian Armed Forces who last served as a peacekeeper in Rwanda. (See also *Bifocal*, co-written with Deborah Ellis.)


WEBSITES

The following websites provide access to valuable resources, including books, book lists, articles, lesson plans, videos, films, and other websites.

Rethinking Schools: Rethinking Early Childhood Education
http://www.rethinkingschools.org/ProdDetails.asp?ID=9780942961416

Don’t Laugh at Me

International Reading Association
www.reading.org

Deepening Knowledge Project: Resources for and about Aboriginal Education
http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/deepeningknowledge/

Maclean’s magazine article: “Why are Schools Brainwashing our Children?”
http://www2.macleans.ca/2012/10/31/why-are-schools-brainwashing-our-children/

Council of Ontario Drama and Dance Educators (CODE)
www.code.on.ca

Ontario Art Education Association
http://www.oaea.ca/

Teaching Tolerance: A Project of the Southern Poverty Law Center
teachingtolerance.org

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in Child-Friendly Language

Centre for Urban Schooling (CUS)
http://cus.oise.utoronto.ca

Toronto District School Board
www.tdsb.on.ca